

Discovering Physical Narrative in Unusual Source Material

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A report on a workshop conducted as part of Nightswimming's Pure Research program, in association with Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University. Conducted at SFU's Woodward's Centre, in Vancouver, May 30, 31, June 1, 2013. Nightswimmingtheatre.com.

Background

Natalie Schneck (choreographer) and Joanna Garfinkel (director/dramaturg) have worked together for more than two years as collaborators in various contexts. Each has longed for a new way to develop theatre from non-narrative source material, separate from current abstract and collagist trends; and also for a method that looks outside of the self for source material. We are united by a populist point of view, encompassing unusual, outsider, found, unassuming, and “non-artistic” references. We are engaged in a passionate, rigorous practice; believing in regular training, development and expansion of familiar and comfortable modes.

We express our gratitude to Brian Quirt and Rupal Shah (Nightswimming Theatre) and DD Kugler (SFU Contemporary Arts) for the time and space to attempt this project; and to our collaborators (Jenn Griffin, Naomi Sider, Victoria Lyons, Elliot Vaughan and recorder Elyse Cheadle) for being fearless and jumping into something entirely unknown.

Research Goals and Plans

Our goals focused on creating a dramaturgical template to create emotional and evocative performance work from non-narrative source material. Both of us were chafing against popular, abstractionist trends, and were curious to find out if we could develop a formula that worked against these trends and encouraged a visceral, engaged body and language. We wanted to work against simple collage and narrative removal, and toward a new distinctive form.

Our non-narrative source material for this exploration was pamphlets, commonly available (but exhaustively sourced) and we aimed to discover their theatrical potential by creating exercises that could then be used by other artists, across different media, to confront and integrate with other found materials. Pamphlets were not an accidental choice—our goals included creating theatre as direct and immediate as a pamphlet, and as transactional with the physical exchange of information. We sought many different ways to approach the material physically and philosophically. We specifically aimed to broaden the physical performative potential of theatre, to transform rhythm and the body's interaction with text, and the kind of text played.

Our plans included working with collaborators, and taking turns inside and outside the work to record and reflect on the exercises. We set aside time at the end of each day to process the accomplishments so far, and to refine and redevelop the pieces that emerged.

Context, Preparation, and Development

When we were selected for Nightswimming's Pure Research program we began an intensive pamphlet collection and research journey. We were concerned with the curatorial eye of collection: seeking unusual language, phrases, and surprising imagery/artwork. The pamphlets and their contexts imposed the first dramaturgical rules we later applied to our Pure Research work.

For example, one of our stops included a preschool fair in the suburbs. Parents were offered pamphlets as a way of education, assistance, support, and contained information about what to do in times of extreme crisis with their children. We also visited a hospice where we collected pamphlets about how to deal with death and grief.

In Vancouver's downtown eastside, we visited shelters, crisis centres, churches and government agencies. In this famously tumultuous place, we collected source material while attempting to approach the mission as any other information-seeker would, rather than with the artistic or social remove of an outsider. Though our intentions were clear, and our approach respectful, during this visit we found ourselves in the midst of a brief but dangerous situation with a group of young men.

The immediacy of the context was never lost on any of our collection missions, and lent the suggestion that pamphlets largely have a shared subtext, and that subtext is often crisis. Whether it is a parent worried about their child, a person in a quieter struggle, or us collecting outside our usual sphere, the "planned immediacy" of pamphlets is usually deployed in extreme circumstance.

Meanwhile, throughout the collection process, we worked rigorously to devise and revise our Pure Research schedule to develop language and vocabulary for describing our research methods and tactics.

Notes on Process:

When and how collaborators join the generative process is an important consideration.

Upon reflection, perhaps the separation of the planning and execution phases of our process led to some misconceptions. We worked so very hard during the planning. We felt unable to ask our collaborators to do any unpaid work before we began.

As generators of work there is so much insecurity and unknown and so there is an impulse (for all of us) to keep this struggle internal; however outward acknowledgement of the insecurity and an invitation to collaborate earlier on could have proved quite useful.

Day 1

On day 1, we invited writer Jenn Griffin to collaborate with us along with composer Elliot Vaughan and student Elysse Cheadle to be our documentarian. Elliot would join us for all three days, and each day would feature a specific additional collaborator.

We presented the pamphlets as the strict source material for the experiments and asked our collaborators to spend some time with the material we had collected. We asked each to create physical stylizations titled *Assemble* and *De-construct*. Each stylization included a series of parameters including one that had to be a physicalization or choreography from a specific point of view. Our outside collaborators left at 1pm.

We aimed to create *Stylizations*, developed in the moment, coming from each individual's point of view. We specifically wanted to work away from existing *compositional* habits. This was inevitably difficult, because custom, practice, training and the similar context that triggers repeated behaviours were obstacles in even ourselves.

Although we had worked to redefine compositions, our collaborators seemed to still resort back to familiar methods of creation, in which everyone wears different hats. We felt that this created an egalitarian context of creation where expertise in a particular area is not given enough time and attention to develop, and although the form of composition created may be of interest, the skills within are not highlighted. Therefore, the physicality was not nuanced with a point a view, and many aspects were missing specificity – it left the creations we developed vague and chaotic.

It seemed, upon reflection, that having collaborators join us without prior preparation and for only a single day was not as productive an approach as we had planned. We chose our collaborators because of their areas of expertise and because we have been inspired by them in the past. For the future, a better plan would be that two or three of us enter a more extensive collaboration in a research or even a development context right from the start of the planning process and prepare together collectively before entering the room.

Many things developed during this first day were useful, however, despite our frustrations. With Jenn's excellent authorial and curatorial instincts, we found texts and themes that would repeat throughout. Please see attached videos from day one.

Day 1 afternoon

In the afternoon, we evaluated how we had allotted our time. Brian had spoken with us about trying to do things we don't know how to do. This put us in a bit of excellent artistic crisis. Up until that point, we had felt pushed to explain, refine, and know in specific detail every single moment of the three-day residency.

We were also asked to work away from the impulse of refining.

We asked: How can we be personal but avoid the literal?
And how can we play with scale?

We came up with a series of tasks to try out on ourselves, and then on our collaborators the next day. Questions specifically designed to explore *tache*, the idea of incorporating point of view as a mark left on gesture, and the personal in itself.

Our interest with the personal (the human and his or her experiences) lies with the mark their past and point of view leaves on the body while doing something:

Can you come from a context only you would know about?
Can you think about the third person you had sex with?
Can you come from your first moment this morning?
Can you come from the biggest fight you ever had?
Pick the pamphlet you would have picked five years ago.
Can you do the task you're doing while thinking about what turns you on?

We also realized that our original plan to move from the outside of the work (from a directorial point of view) to the inside of the work (from a performer point of view) was a problematic structure. One of us felt obliged at all times to be responding as a researcher, and thus could not be "in the moment" and in the space working/tinkering in an intense and curious way. We possibly were not relying on our observers and archivist enough.

Day 2

Designer Naomi Sider joined us and we explored design/spatial relationships and visual aspects with using pamphlets.

At this point, we had basically thrown out some details of what we felt we had to so rigorously plan because they were not useful to the flow and structure of our collaboration.

We wanted to ask of our collaborators, "Is there something you're personally connected to and invested in with regards to our material?"

We understood that we were looking at imperfect connective tissue.

We made great strides with Naomi and wanted to continue to work with her for the full day. However, because it was a significant value for us to pay every single person we worked with a living wage, it compromised the quantity of time we had with each individual collaborator. This was a difficult tension for us as we did not want to ask people to volunteer their time to us--we have both been in this place before as artists. In the future, a smaller group of collaborators, still fully compensated but more deeply invested in the process and its discoveries would be more productive.

Exercises from Day 2:

Experiment One – Circuit Game

In the afternoon of the previous day, we developed a circuit game based on and around the physical structure of taped boxes on the floor.

Pamphlets were arranged and distributed in taped boxes on the floor

- Sound of a clap to move from box to box

1) When you are in the box one must use text from the pamphlet and physicality/image

2) Outside the box repeated movement

3) Launch yourself with subtext

Some observations:

- Breath and time become affected by the pamphlets' subtext

- Collaborators only see each other/respond to one another when they are inside the box

- One performer is speaking about the value of organization

- One performer holds the pamphlet high in the air like a flag

- Spoken text feels intimate

Experiment Two – building choreography using the skills of the four collaborators:

Naomi - space

Natalie - movement

Joanna - text

Elliot - sound

- Three dancers stand facing each other in a triangle, and “fold out” into a line that mimics the physical structure of a pamphlet

- opening/revealing

- whispering grows and adds to overall sound texture

- squeaking the pamphlet by running fingers along its face

- flapping the pamphlet

Experiment Three – Intimacy/Small-Scale

- Three Collaborators: One reads from pamphlets, one speaks subtext, one interacts physically with the pamphlet as object

Experiment Four – Exploring Three Dimensionality of Pamphlets

- incorporate body into card structure - with body folded like a pamphlet

- large pieces of paper were added to the pamphlets, and folded into segments

- Natalie sits on the floor in a shape and a “house of cards” structure is built around her. Her foot protrudes through the delicate structure.

- careful/attentive movement of hands building the structure

Experiment Five – Three Dimensionality on a Standing Body, and Architecture

- Natalie is covered by pamphlets by the other dancers. The pamphlets are taped onto her body. Sometimes she is still, sometimes she moves.
- Naomi suggests that each pamphlet's content could somehow relate to the movement in that part of the body.

Day 2 afternoon

We had a heated discussion about form; we were trying to create a structure and environment that nurtured a physical language, but we didn't want the content to be abstract or cerebral. This is a difficult goal with our time constraints, and also within a research and abstract-construction context. We feel proud of our efforts and our collaborators despite these challenges. Joanna wrote text based on what we had collected and attempted to give a narrative through-line. Natalie created new variations of the circuit game that incorporated fewer boxes and a clearer relationship between the physical and verbal context and the space.

Day 3

Performer Victoria Lyons joined us. We tried the box game variations, encouraging the personal to land in the performer and allowing the three of us to yield to the source/categories. We wanted to include the awareness of the relationship between the person and the object that had developed on the previous day. We found, however, that the most authentic moments were in relationship to each other.

Victoria gave us plenty of articulate feedback throughout the day about her experiences as a collaborator and in collision with our source material. She was curious about what could come next in the text; noted that she wanted to be behind the safety of a character instead of the vulnerability of the self, and that she was repeatedly drawn to the physicality of the prop.

We played several iterations of the Pamphlet/Box game in which pamphlets were outside the box and a copy of the text Joanna had written was inside each box. We wanted to focus on impulse and narrative. We decided that a rule needed to be put in place about moving between the boxes. Other observations included embracing the grotesque imagery and even colours of the pamphlets. The pamphlets, with their rigorous forms, demanded a theatre that had strong and intuitive structure to echo this, which was lyrical, physical and emotionally resonant.

Labels on the squares that provided basis for choreography and tone:

- S1. Eating
- S2. Getting Dressed
- S3. My Dad
- S4. Working
- S5. My Sister
- S6. Sex

S7. Protecting
S8. My Mom

We discovered that the “residue” in a performer’s body from a previous box whilst he or she is transitioning to a new box was intimate and full of intention. We were able to see the “history” of one previous experience in the new box. We were left with a large question:

Can text grow by being observed through the lens of everyday behaviour?

Day Three afternoon Notes and Observations:

On confronting and integrating found objects - How is the source present in the integration?

What specific use is the source in the integration?

Can we create non-narrative material that is lyrical, physical, and emotionally resonant with a rigorous structure?

Lyrical: Narrative text

Physical: A struggle to embody a cerebral source

Emotionally Resonant: Challenging to find, why? There was a tension between scale of the style/form, the literal text, and narrative

Looking outside self but having a personal mark:

In general, we need more time to embody this (admittedly huge) source and create a *pattern* of embodiment with the source.

We asked what to do when the physicality gets vague/mushy or shuts down?

The best and most successful touchstones involved having a shared physical vocabulary (as we intended to with Natalie’s articulation chart) and finding a shared context (through Joanna’s text and narrative/subtext of “You could be better.”) Please see attached documents.

Conclusion

There are certainly images, sequences and texts discovered within that will have a future life. More significantly, we have begun the process of creating exercises and a rubric for a new approach to exploring source material. We hope to use further studio and development time to expand on our generative template. To say we could finish our ambitious goal in three days would be folly, but the time and experience was invaluable.

Video Links – password = pureresearch

<http://vimeo.com/72558124>

<http://vimeo.com/72557298>

<http://vimeo.com/72537194>