

Pure Research Report - October 2005

Theatre in Music

by Nick Fraser & Justin Haynes

Outline and Original Proposal

Any musical performance contains theatre (or theatrical elements), from the highly ritualized entrance of a symphony conductor, to a folk singer telling stories in between songs. This project seeks to explore the theatrical elements of musical performance. Justin Haynes and I have worked as a musical duo for close to 15 years. We have worked in many different contexts together, including improvised music, pop music, musical theatre and performance art. In the last few years, both in our improvised duo music and in the groups John School and The Sweetest Noise, our performances have taken on a more theatrical nature. We have used elements of stand-up comedy, theatrical improv, dance and spoken word to animate our music. There is a wide tradition of this type of activity in Dutch music, championed by percussionist Han Bennink and pianist Misha Mengelberg's Instant Composer's Pool, yet (to my knowledge) it hasn't been explored formally or in any depth in this country.

Some of these performance experiments with Justin were among my favourite events of my career, while others were disastrous. This wide variation is normal in improvised work, yet when we simply play music we have not only a base level of ability, but a wide vocabulary to draw from since we are both professional musicians. In other words, when we are playing music, we have the musical vocabulary to create structures spontaneously, whereas when improvising "theatrically", we have no such vocabulary. The question we wish to ask is as follows: What is the theatre of a musical performance when one is not playing an instrument, and in what ways can this theatre be exploited by a musical group?

We will attempt to answer this question in two phases. In the first phase of the project, we wish to explore the more theatrical aspects of our work as a duo by working with an acting coach. Working with the coach can help us learn some basic techniques for making our performances more effective and allow us to improve and expand the theatrical aspects of our existing work. We would like to get some basic ideas about using movement in improvisation, exploring the transition points between music and theatre, and how to stay "in character" when not playing our instruments, thereby approaching our musical set as a total, integrated performance from beginning to end. We will have four 2-3 hour long sessions over a two-week period.

We also wish to explore the effect this integration of musical and theatrical improvisation has on an audience. The second phase will involve two performances after which we will survey the audience regarding their reactions to the work. Did the context of the work effect the audience's reaction? What role did their expectations play in their appreciation of the work? There will be two

performances, one at the end of the first week (after the first two sessions with the coach), and one at the end of the second week. This will allow any issues raised by the first performance to be addressed in our sessions in the second week.

Report

After we were chosen to participate in the research program, we spoke with Brian Quirt and Naomi Campbell from Nightswimming about exactly how we should work. Naomi and Brian proposed Bruce Hunter as our coach. Bruce is a noted actor and improviser who has worked with improv troupe The Illustrated Men for over fifteen years, has been a stand-up comedian, a sketch comedy performer, an improv teacher, a serious theatre and movie actor, a clown, a mime and even a muppeteer.

The first day with Bruce, we worked on a number of exercises, joined by Brian, Naomi, intern Andrea Romaldi and Pure Research administrator Megan Hamilton. These exercises took the form of games that were played in a circle or with partners. One was "the name game" where we were to, in rhythm, say someone's name as we pointed at them (clap, point, look them in the eye). They then did the same. A variation was to say someone else's name as we pointed. The person whose name was said continued (not the person who was pointed at). This was followed by a storytelling exercise: a story was told one word at a time with two or three people, first looking at each other, then with eyes closed. Then, a larger group told a story, pointing to the next person for the following word. We learned a game called "Me-Switch", where partners attempt to get "on the same page" by predicting one of a set of movements initiated by the other partner and then performing the movements in unison.

Most of these games/exercises seemed designed to get us "into the zone". I found this quite interesting, since in my musical training this type of work has generally been seen as either something that is useless and unnecessary or something that is an advanced musical step. I certainly didn't deal with that type of material (or material that had that as its goal) until adulthood. In 1998, pianist Kenny Werner wrote a book called *Effortless Mastery*, designed to help jazz musicians "let go" of their preconceptions about music and use meditative techniques to improve their musicianship. The book (and his various workshops and lectures) were greeted with equal parts skepticism and acceptance from the jazz community.

Basically, there is widely divergent opinion on the value of this type of work in musical preparation. I find two things fascinating here: that it took jazz education (unfortunately the only standard academic venue for teaching improvisation in North America) 40 years to get to a place where talk of getting into "the zone" was even introduced, and that it was greeted with derision from many parts of the community when it was. When we were working with Bruce, getting into "the zone" was one of the first things we talked about and was the goal of many of our initial

exercises. This is a notable difference between musical training for improvisation and theatrical improv training.

From the first day of our project, Justin and I felt that Bruce was being a hard-ass. I thought that perhaps the teaching of acting/improv has a different concept of the importance of authority than musical work. I asked Bruce about this during a post-project interview, and he said that he could have been a whole lot more authoritative if he'd wanted to be, but that he didn't feel he needed to be. He did say that we didn't have time to "live in the place where we know". In other words, he felt that given the amount of time we had, we should dive right in to the hard work. Part of that work has to do with recognizing things that are part of ourselves, things that we may have done since we were children (unconscious physical/verbal habits), "the things we're made of", and giving them up. I found this process much more difficult than giving up, for example, the way I play quarter notes on the ride cymbal, because it's fundamentally more personal than that (even though I've always thought that a musician's idiosyncrasies of tone and phrasing are infinitely personal).

Given our contrary nature, this was especially uncomfortable work for Justin and me. It could be that a large part of why we felt that Bruce was being hard on us was that we were being told things we'd never been told before about ourselves. Due to this discomfort, I felt that Justin and I put up a fair bit of resistance to some of the ideas presented. In our interview, I asked Bruce if he thought that we were giving him a hard time. Often, he said, students in the workshops that he teaches are completely accepting of everything he says ("they take it as gospel"), and he has found that frustrating. While we were questioning some of the things he said, it was refreshing for him and did not act as a hindrance.

The second day, we repeated and expanded upon some of the exercises that we learned the previous day, joined this time by Lois Brown, Liz Pickard, Andrea Romaldi and Brian. The storytelling exercise was adjusted to allow for entire stories made up by one person. One person would tell a story. His partner would then tell the story as if it were his own, but embellish it. This goes back and forth. Eventually, the story is told by both parties simultaneously, interrupting and feeding each other. We also worked on a scene where we were to improvise a scenario and act it out wordlessly, paying close attention to the details inherent in our chosen scenario. Justin and I played two workmen building a garage. The exercise involved paying close attention to the things that we had imagined as part of the scene (where the hammers were, where the nails were, where our drinks were, what parts of the garage were "done", etc...) This exercise was important for me, in retrospect, because at the end of the project one of the things that I heard from an audience member was that if there's anything to this type of activity, it's in the level of detail that we are able to apply to it. I agree completely.

We also explored the concept of an "offer" (a bit of material that is offered to the other performers as the basis for development), and the concept of "status". While the concept of an offer seems to be a fairly universal one, the status of characters on stage (i.e. high or low) is an idea that I'm not sure has a musical correlation. I found this concept difficult to apply consciously in performance.

In another exercise from the second day, we were presented with a scenario in which a word was made up by the performers (Justin and myself) and explained to the "audience". In our first attempt, Justin walked off the stage only to appear at the back of the room, while I was left on stage floundering, trying to maintain the "piece". The exercise was stopped by Bruce and discussed. For our second attempt, we both stayed on stage and completed the exercise as "planned". Despite the difficulties that it presented, I found Justin's choice to walk off stage to be entertaining and interesting. Yes, I was uncomfortable. I'm sure the audience was or would have been uncomfortable. I think this is not only acceptable, it may be a desirable quality in a performance.

Something that I discovered in my interview with Bruce about the performer/audience relationship in music and theatre is that Bruce says that often in theatre the most amazing moments happen in workshop as opposed to performance. My experience as a musician has been the opposite (although, interestingly enough, the best moments of this particular project happened in workshop, not in performance). Usually, in music, rehearsals are spent going over structural aspects of the music and not actually playing (i.e. putting your all into it as you would in performance). This experience has led me to believe that actors and musicians have fundamentally different relationships with an audience. Things that Bruce said during our workshop period had much more to do with the audience than I am used to as a musician. The aesthetic of constantly keeping the audience in mind and constantly being entertaining is foreign to me (and undesirable). If we played music that way we'd be fucked from beat one.

We had our first performance at the end of the first week (October 16th), which mainly consisted of playing and talking. We sat at our instruments for most of the show and alternated between episodes of playing music and telling stories and talking to each other and the audience. This resulted in a not entirely integrated performance. There was no moment where the music and the theatre were entirely "one". After the performance we had our post-show Q&A with the audience. We opted for this format rather than a written survey because we thought it would better encourage a back-and-forth sharing of ideas about the performance as opposed to a stricter written format. Unfortunately, the first week's Q&A session was not recorded, but I recall that the audience spoke positively about our use of the space (the Glen Morris Theatre at the University of Toronto). One of the things I realized was that it was somewhat moot to raise the issue of context for these performances, since much of my curiosity had to do with how this type of material would be received if it were presented as part of a purely musical performance, yet

all of the people who came knew that there was going to be some extra-musical activity. We did raise the issue, in a "what if...?" sort of fashion, but it was difficult to get more out of the audience than vague answers (one of the answers was "well, you could do it in a bar, and just bill it as music, but it would be... different").

During this process, points of contrast and similarity between musical and theatrical improvisation kept occurring to me. The role of the audience and the relationship between the performers and the audience was one such case. In improvised music, the audience is complicit in the musical activity, yet somewhat incidental to its result. There is never any talk among improvising musicians of what the audience might think of something. Judging from what we heard from Bruce over our two-week research period, this is not the case with theatrical improv. "Never let them see you sweat" was something we heard from Bruce a number of times. I'm not sure what relevance this credo has to playing music. As an audience member myself, I find seeing performers work at something that's not working (i.e. seeing them "sweat") one of the most entertaining things to witness and I find a sense of shamelessness about what's working and what's not attractive in a performance.

Something else that we heard from Bruce repeatedly has to do with the concept of "bullshit". We were told that a goal was to be able to "bullshit our way through anything", to just "bullshit, bullshit, bullshit". It's possible that I'm simply missing the point, but I was quite put off by this notion. In my notes during the workshop period I wrote:

"Bruce says that we should "bullshit our way through anything". My feeling is that bullshit is just that (bullshit) and when I'm playing music, I'm trying to be honest with people, which is the opposite of bullshit."

Certainly, the idea of bullshitting on stage was characterized in my musical education and formative experiences as something extremely undesirable. This could be an issue of terminology. Bruce may mean something different when he says "bullshit" than what I understand the word to mean. If, by "bullshit", he means "let go" or "go for it, just do anything and don't worry about what comes out", then I can agree with it, but we also heard those things separately. The idea of letting go of thinking did seem central. "Thinking is not necessary or helpful in improvising" is something that Bruce said that I've heard musicians say a number of times over the years. I've had a hard time with this idea in the past, since on one level it is obvious (anyone who's had experience improvising knows that a huge part of it is beyond the intellect); on another level it can lead to a reductionist view of music and art in general. I often feel that the intellectual aspects of music are devalued by certain parts of the musical community. If the goal is to go beyond thinking, one needs to have an intellectual cognition of this fact for it to have any meaning. Of course, the goal is to go beyond thinking, not to throw thinking out the window.

During the second week, the work was more focused on Justin and I as a duo. This was partly due to the fact that the interns and co-participants who'd been included during the first week were not there the second week. The first day of our second week, it was only Bruce, Justin and I, joined on our last workshop day by Brian Quirt. Although it was unintended, structuring the project in this way was quite helpful for us. It was helpful to have the others there during the first week when we were feeling out what exactly what it was we were going to do, and it was helpful for them not to be there when we had it figured out.

The work we did the second week was closer to what Justin and I had envisioned before the project. We felt that we were simply working with a coach on our existing duo work. One of the things that we all decided was a key to our performances was making music the centre of what we do. We felt that our performances often fell apart when we introduced the extra-musical elements. One way around that, suggested by Brian and Bruce, was to keep sound going at all times. This made everything we did more effective as our "theatre" didn't have to stand on its own. It also allowed us to play from our strength (music) and allow everything to grow out of that. I had done a lot of thinking before the project about how to integrate the music and the theatre, but I didn't think that it would be as simple as literal integration (i.e. giving every piece of theatre a musical aspect). In retrospect, it felt a bit funny to do that since our original question had to do with the theatre of musical performance when one is not playing their instrument, but I think that was a simple matter of us not ending up where we started. One of the great things about this research program is that we never felt under any pressure to "arrive" at a given place. The question that we were trying to answer raised other questions that we felt free to explore. Of course, I'm still interested in our original question (for instance, when does stage patter cease to be stage patter and become something else?), but it was great to be able to move the focus of our work away from it.

Our second performance took place on October 22nd. For this performance, our theatrical elements became less language oriented and more about movement than our first performance. The use of language had been a sticking point in our work earlier in the week, in that our pieces tended to weaken when language entered the picture. We used language in only one segment of our second performance. I noticed when I saw the video of this performance that we were able to create a large variety of images in one performance. In contrast to a band that, say, dresses in outrageous uniforms, but is then stuck with that one image for the remainder of their performance, we were able to create multiple images and scenarios.

Our second performance was not as successful as the work we had done during the week. One of the things that altered the performance from the beginning was that while we had decided to make our musical relationship the centre of our work, we made a few other decisions that went against that. We decided to cover our instruments with big sheets so that they were covered when we walked on stage. Brian observed after the performance that this act served to separate us from music

and from each other. It also meant that we were in the world of theatre as opposed to the world of music when we started the show.

Bruce and I agreed in our interview that in all improvised work, pre-conceived ideas can be a problem. The issue is how they are treated. In music, it's difficult to make decisions that are irrevocable (unless it's a decision regarding, say, what instrument to bring to a gig), but once we had those sheets on our instruments, we had to deal with them. We could take them off, but we couldn't make them disappear, whereas in music, if we were to stop doing something that we had started due to a questionable musical decision, it does disappear. The key seems to be to not to stay wed to one's preconceived ideas and to keep those ideas mutable enough that they can be discarded easily.

Whenever I've tried to explain this project to others, I'd say something like the following: "We have so much vocabulary as musicians, but no vocabulary as actors. As musicians, there are any number of structures we can employ that can help us improvise a piece of music, but when theatre is introduced we have nothing." I realized somewhere along the line during this project that perhaps our problem as a duo has never been a lack of vocabulary, but perhaps too much vocabulary without any sense of restraint or good decision-making about when to do and not to do things. I feel that perhaps I looked at this project as a way of finding out if this direction (the fusion of music and theatre) was one to pursue, but also a way of getting this stuff out of our systems so that we could focus on making music.

In retrospect, I'm not sure if this was a reasonable expectation of this project. In any case, it certainly was interesting and a very productive experience for Justin and me. We learned a lot about our own tendencies as artists (both musically and extra-musically) and about the art of improvisation in general. I would like to extend a special thanks to Nightswimming for supporting this project.

This research was conducted at the University of Toronto, Canada, from October 12–22, 2005. Our thanks to Bruce Hunter for his expertise and ideas.