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Crossing boundaries: an excavation into an interdisciplinary approach to theatre making with specific reference to body mapping

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses through a Practice as Research methodology an interdisciplinary approach to theatre making. The capacity for the process of Body Mapping to form part of the theatre making process is assessed. Structured and unstructured improvisational techniques (including Body Mapping and contact improvisation) are used in facilitating four subjects who are actively involved in the creative process as *performer-creators.* The material generated from these sessions is then crafted into a performance work, as well as exposing the creative process in an exhibition of photographs and writings drawn from the improvisational workshops. The documentation is then consolidated in the form of a research report analysing the use of interdisciplinary approaches to theatre making with specific reference to Body Mapping.

DECLARATION

I declare that this Research Report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the Degree of Masters of Arts (Dramatic Arts) in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before in other degree or examination in any other university.



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Roger Gordon Paul Lambert

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We can choose to observe the stream of thoughts filling our minds, or we can try to ignore them, to focus on something else, on nothing. But if we listen we might hear/learn something essential, essential to ourselves…

Louise Steinman. 1986

CROSSING BOUNDARIES:

An excavation into an interdisciplinary approach to theatre making with specific reference to body mapping

A RESEARCH REPORT BY CREATIVE RESEARCH AND WRITTEN REPORT

INTRODUCTION

> *The journey I'm taking is inside me. Just as blood travels down veins, what I'm seeing is my inner self, and what seems threatening is just the echo of the fear in my heart. The spider's web stretched taught over there is the spiders web inside me. The birds calling out overhead are birds I've fostered in my mind. These images spring up in my mind and take root.*
> (Haruki Murakami. 2005: 428)

The 20th Century was dominated by a phalologocentric worldview. Academia was steeped in traditional dichotomies. However, as the world has been evolving, due to globalisation, so too are we as theatre makers subject to continuous processes of evolution. The arts evolve at a dramatic rate and it is up to us as artists to sustain our development in cognisance of this. Botha (2006:1) suggests that the result has been "the evolution of a range of alternative forms, sporting revolutionary theories of the dramatic and new approaches to performance". Tuffnell and Crickmay (1990: Introduction) suggest that one way of shifting the boundaries within which we experience the world is through improvisation:

> *"In being receptive to the immediate moment and in turning our own sensations, feelings, dreams, we begin our own narrative of discovery that differs from the received narratives of our culture."*

It can thus be deduced that our bodies are a manifestation of the lives we lead and the histories that we have paved. This speaks directly to Murakami's words and suggests that the journey to discovery is housed within our own bodies and experiences.

Murakami's words and Tuffnell and Crickmay's postulation gives one an insight into the type of material that was engaged with during this project, most specifically during the creative project. The creative tasks took all involved on a personal journey of discovery through the body. A journey at times fraught with peril at the discovery of hidden truths that were hard to hear and at times welcoming with the memories of beauty held within the body.

This project was an engagement with an interdisciplinary approach to theatre making. It is this blurring of boundaries (theory *vs.* practice, mind *vs.* body, content *vs.* form) that was fundamental to the theatre making process. In order to forge innovative theatrical and research content, the theatre making process directly engaged with the notions of Practice as Research, interdisciplinary processes, Physical Theatre and most importantly, Body Mapping. The project aimed to utilise these processes as a tool to unlock the creative potential of the body. These processes were applied in conjunction with other creative tools used in the creation of work in physical theatre such as improvisation and contact improvisation.

Ullman (1950) suggests that there is a parallel between the history of human behaviour and the life history of each individual person. It is this notion that interested me most. The question that came to mind most frequently was "How can I, as a theatre maker, unlock the hidden potentials of a performer?" It is for this reason that I turned to the processes and theories of Body Mapping. Body Mapping is a process that I was introduced to by my mentor Athena Mazarakis in my senior years of study. This time spent with her made me aware of the limitations and restrictions on my body and it also became apparent that many of these restrictions and limitations had been self-imposed. It also made me aware of the absolute necessity to be aware of the blocks I had developed because the only way to overcome them and achieve an ideal state in the body is to have knowledge of one's blocks and to work through them and/or find a way around them.

This paper will look at theatre making and how it is approached, by an inspection of and brief discussion on several theatre practices.

Body Mapping will also be discussed with reference firstly to its origins, secondly with regards to its relevance as a tool and lastly how Body Mapping was applied during the project. Physical Theatre will also be investigated as that is the mode in which the creative work was created and also as it is a form that can already be considered as interdisciplinary as Physical Theatre borrows from various forms and disciplines in the creation of work.

The methodology that was applied to this project will be interrogated firstly for its relevance as a methodology and secondly how the methodology was approached. The chosen methodology was Practice as Research. This methodology will be used to account for the examination of Body Mapping, the body as archive and the role of the facilitator within a creative experience.

A case study which takes the form of an analysis of the creative task of this project will be discussed with reference to the arguments in the earlier chapters of the paper. Finally, the paper will attempt to draw conclusions as to the efficacy of these approaches and possible future suggestions.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

CHAPTER 1 – MY ART HAS MEANING: Practice as Research as a Methodology.

In this chapter the notion of Practice as Research will be introduced. We will look at both the ways in which the idea for a research methodology grounded in practice came about and at its relevance today to the performer/creator/director/researcher. We begin to look at the relation of body/mind, practice/academic, performing body/performing words, within the tradition of western academy *vs.* Practice as Research. These approaches place the weighting and importance on these binaries very differently, with Practice as Research placing the obvious emphasis on that of the practical as opposed to the written/spoken words. This, being grounded in practice – in the body, is a form that is difficult to put down in words as it is a transient experience that constantly shifts – a malleable experience.

"Don't speak I can hear you" are lyrics from the song Raphael by Coco Rosie. They seem to point to this idea of moving away from the written/spoken accounts of knowledge and to a more practically based system grounded in the body. After all, as Kenneth Lincoln (as cited in Steinman, 1986: 107) states, "*A man of knowledge, it has been, said dances his wisdom*".

CHAPTER 2 – A SHIFTING PATH: Theatre-making and performance has changed.

In this chapter, Physical Theatre is discussed in relation to the shifting ways we create work. Theatre-making and performance are malleable entities and those that are never in a set position but are constantly shifting, being based on the experience and the people involved. We will look at the notions of an experimental theatre, collaboration, the use of space, the shift away from director and performer as separate roles, and the move towards the role of facilitator-creator, performer-creator, etc. The role of facilitator will be discussed in depth with reference to personal experience in working within the role. These notions will be discussed with and in relation to Physical Theatre. The different areas of study within Physical Theatre such as biography, personal history, political history, etc. will be discussed. Physical Theatre will also be discussed as it is an existing interdisciplinary theatre mode. The

way we make theatre and perform, and the roles many practitioners experience and create are pliable, malleable and open to a change or shift in direction.

<u>CHAPTER 3</u> – OUR SKIN A MEMOIR OF THE PAST: Mapping out Uncharted Narratives

In this chapter the process of Body Mapping will be discussed. It will be introduced and explained to the reader firstly, with reference to its history as a process, both in terms of its founding and also in relation to theorists/processes/trainings that Body Mapping draws from; secondly in terms of its relevance to the project, both as an improvisational tool for unlocking creative potential and as a means to engage with the body as archive; and lastly as a tool that is able to engage with the body as a malleable entity under a state of flux.

The use of personal stories will be discussed – the personal stories held within our bodies. The archived body and personal narrative will be discussed with reference to the process of Body Mapping, investigating the relevance of Body Mapping as a tool to explore the bank of material filed away in the body's archive. We look at how experience/memory/history/etc. is neither fixed nor absolute but is rather under a constant state of change - Always different, never resting, always malleable. Even shared experiences are different for each person experiencing them on an individual level. Body Mapping, the archived body and personal narrative and their relationship to one another will be discussed. This chapter will make the link between the relevance for the application of body mapping to a theatre making approach within the mode of physical theatre.

<u>CHAPTER 4</u> - YOUR MAPS ARE MY MAP, THE STORIES WE SHARE ARE THE ONES WE DON'T NEED TO SPEAK OF: Analysis of Process and the creation of *Here Inside Us.*

The practical creative process will be discussed in this chapter. The rehearsal process will be looked at, starting with the initial steps in Body Mapping (the material gathering phase, heading towards the creative tasks working with the material extracted from the body using Body Mapping), followed by the final crafting phase and then the actual production and exhibition of photographic documentation.