

Abstract

'Here is my space; the nobleness of life is to do thus': Democratizing Performance and Embodying Presence at the Pop-up Globe Theatre in Auckland

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This paper considers elemental, performative, and spatial opportunities available to actors, directors, and audience in the construction of performance on the open-air stage. This stems from reflection and evidence gained while directing and producing a heavily-edited, contemporary reworking of Shakespeare's *Antony & Cleopatra* at the Pop-up Globe Theatre's inaugural season in Auckland (March-April 2016). This temporary spatial response to Shakespeare gave birth to something quite new in the South Pacific that has since been iterated many times, and proven to be a successful exercise in democratizing performance for many.

More than 100,000 people attended the first Pop-up Globe season; in *Antony & Cleopatra*, the cast and crew of twenty brought a particular New Zealand sensibility to the work that was enhanced further by the architecture of this space. This was in turn met by the audiences' appetite for something uniquely 'Antipodean' in its construction.

Having assistant-directed at Shakespeare's Globe in London several years before, the whole experiment in Auckland was remarkably different for me. Even so, some cardinal rules can be applied to this space. From the architecture of the condensed second Pop-up Globe to the audience sensibilities that emerged through the season, it must be noted that the creative muscle of the space, actors, and audience grew very fast. Creative 'responsibility', confidence, and mutuality came to the fore of the theatrical experience on offer to elicit a unique kind of performance democracy. This paper considers specific learnings that emerged for me as the key creative and producer of this project. It also looks at how this open-air stage space determines particular performance choices available to actor, director, and audience that are compelling and dynamic.

These performances crystallised a postcolonial sense of 'wild' theatre - albeit linked to expected notions of open-air stage Shakespeare - that was tamed in time and space to answer a call to connect the present with the past in multi-faceted ways. This construct combined history, spectacle, 'truth', and most all, the longing to create and remember a unique experience. Reflection suggests that the creation of this temporary Globe and our production within it ultimately underline elements of structured belonging that follow chronological stochasticism and theatrical diaspora, and that contribute to the discourse on how the practices of art and our ways of interpreting art have shaped and is shaping society and how we present, critique, and engage with the forces defining our current understanding of the nature of and the challenges facing the future of democracy as a core organising principle of both society and performance.

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**The fifteenth Arts in Society Conference: Against the Grain:
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Refined abstract:

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and Embodying Presence at the Pop-up Globe Theatre in Auckland**

**Conference Paper
20 mins - 3,000 words**

Tena koutou katoa

My name is Vanessa Byrnes

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<https://youtu.be/afutJNrlisg>

The last few months of pandemic-induced living have reaffirmed for us how to hold close what is most primary in our immediate lives; family, loyal friends, a hot cup of coffee, a walk along a local beach, a good book. For many, this means we now have a reframed view of how to adapt quickly to not just disruption, but eruption. In a sense, we have become universally aware of what matters most. Crisis forces change to happen. As they say, good things take time, but great things often happen all at once.

Two weeks ago, as I watched another Zoom meeting unfold in front of me, I suddenly realised we are living in a time of great paradox. How disembodied, and yet how utterly democratic this medium of Zoom has allowed us to become. The right to speak equally with the same screen real estate has given confidence to many, and politicized our conversations in newfound ways. I think this will have a profound effect on our collective ability to listen and hear with focus; to appreciate corporeal reality, and hopefully, to harness our instinctive compassion just a bit more. And yet, we are not really together in a communal way that, say, theatre allows us to be. This has left so many people discombobulated and socially disembodied, but at the same time we are also aware of what's apparently happening globally. In New Zealand, we quickly complied with limited social gatherings of up to 10 people or more, we trusted the scientists and the

government, but the fear of contagion still lurks in healthy societies such as ours here in New Zealand. So, there are monumental shifts in our known access to freedoms that have occurred literally overnight. I feel that the conference theme of the crisis of democracy has taken on new importance for those of us in the arts.

In a similar vein, Shakespeare also experienced eruption on an unprecedented scale; he lived, adapted, and thrived through multiple outbreaks of political, religious, and of course biological plagues. As we know, the bubonic plague meant that theatres remained closed for several months in 1606. This disease reached the playwright's house in London with the death of his landlady Marie Mountjoy; as James Shapiro notes, she had probably not yet turned 40 when she was buried, at the height of the outbreak, on 30 October that infamous year.¹ Shakespeare came uncomfortably close to this pandemic during multiple outbreaks, and no amount of sniffing oranges with cloves could save the check-by-jowl anguish that living in such conditions must have caused Shakespeare and his contemporaries to witness.

Turbulence aside, or perhaps because of it, we know that most of Shakespeare's wealth came from being a shareholder in the theatre rather than being its writer, so his ability to pivot in the wake of plagues and political tempestuousness was also as a businessman who appealed to an innate sense of democracy and connection in his audience. The social disruption that plague it brings in its wake—conveyed in the rush of seemingly irrelevant details—plays an oddly significant role. Live theatre has always helped recalibrate a sense of democracy, and for us today, this underlying, prescient condition of our pandemic seems to put Shakespeare's canon into stark relief.'

But our topic today is not pandemics; it is about democracy, or 'a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives'. But I must return to the point that as a result of living in the shadow of the plague, I believe that Shakespeare's works and playing spaces are infused with the immediacy of people who know that to act in the moment is to determine the authorship and destiny of your life. That there is - as Stanislavsky might also attest - universality through specificity. There is no second chance for Shakespeare's characters; the immediacy of choice is every man and woman's 'true north'. Love is both 'quick', and compared to 'the plague' for Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Hamlet's Act I sc. 3 existence dilemma is debated with us, the audience, in real time soliloquy.

There is also a potent kind of democracy or shared experience in this view. As Harold Bloom has noted, Shakespeare's work is complete; it marks 'the invention of the human', and both reflects and sets the course for ensuing centuries of Humanistic, self-determined behaviours. Or to echo Samuel Johnson's analysis, 'Shakespeare justly imitates essential

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/24/shakespeares-great-escape-plague-1606--james-shapiro>

human nature, which is a universal and not a social phenomenon'.² In this sense, it is temporally democratic; truly timeless.

As a director, I agree that Shakespeare is wildly democratic, accessible, and representative of the pantheon of human nature and experience. I want to explore here the very elemental, performative, and spatial opportunities available to actors, directors, and audience in the construction of performance on the open-air stage. Shakespeare's drama and the particular architecture of ideas reflected in the open-air space elicit a unique kind of performance democracy that is both contemporary and dynamic, but most of all, one that demands presence and democratic engagement by all. I think this is incredibly contemporary and urgently needed.

My ongoing obsession in this field stems from my reflection of assistant-directing for the marvellous Tim Carroll at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London in 2000, where I experienced the quixotic and raw democracy of an open-air performance in full flight. In this space, there is nowhere for audience or actors to hide; it's a truly communal experience that speaks to the very purpose of theatre; **to make sense of life, or escape from it**. In either case, the *raison-d'être* requires total commitment by both actor and audience to construct the drama. The open-air stage space determines particular performance choices available to actor, director, and audience that are compelling and dynamic. The lessons I learnt while assisting Tim Carroll and the Red Company that year have been tested and developed over the past 20 years on various productions and teaching, but essentially I have maintained an abiding interest in the central question of how to bring Shakespeare's words to life in a way that is dynamic and immediate. The open air stage is capable of this in a way that no other space can be.

PUG

Let me take you now to a hot February in 2016, in Auckland. I directed and produced a heavily-edited, contemporary reworking of Shakespeare's *Antony & Cleopatra* in a new open-air space, simply called The Pop-up Globe Theatre. The Pop Up's inaugural season in Auckland in Summer of 2015 - 2016 attracted over 100,000 audience, and became the hottest go-to venue for several summers thereafter.

This temporary spatial response to Shakespeare - made of very New Zealand materials plywood and scaffolding - was the brainchild of Dr. Miles Gregory and a team of brave souls who believed the open-air stage would be popular with the New Zealand theatregoing psyche. And they were right. It gave birth to something quite new in the South Pacific that has since been iterated many times here and in Australia, and proven to be a successful exercise in democratizing performance for many.

In *Antony & Cleopatra*, the cast and crew of twenty brought a particular New Zealand sensibility to the work that was enhanced further by the architecture of this space. This

² Bloom, p.3.

was in turn met by the audiences' appetite for something uniquely 'Antipodean' in its construction, and as the season went on, I could see theatregoing confidence increasing and the rules of engagement developing exponentially fast.

The Space

You may know that the Pop-up Globe is a full-scale temporary working replica of Shakespeare's theatre, the second Globe, based on research by [Tim Fitzpatrick and Russell Emerson](#) of Sydney University. The second Globe, with its distinctive roof and 'onion dome', stood until the closure of all public playhouses in 1642 during the English Civil War, and was demolished two years later- only to be replaced by tenement housing.

The reconstructed Globe's dimensions on Bankside in London are unknown, but its shape and size can be approximated from scholarly inquiry over the last two centuries. Some evidence suggests that it was a three-story, open-air amphitheatre between **97 and 102 feet** (29.6 - 31.1M) in diameter that could house up to 3,000 spectators.

By comparison, the Pop-up Globe is a 16-sided polygon, **88 feet** (27 m) in external diameter. This is some **12 feet** (3.7 m) smaller than Shakespeare's Globe in London. I don't want to enter into the debate of which Globe is right, but I do want to reflect on the germane features of both.

There are some clear differences between the London Globe and this smaller version. The London Globe is made of oak, and the acoustics are superb. The architecture of the condensed and narrower Pop-up Globe really amplifies the vertical relationship between heaven and earth, and we used this to extreme advantage in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which constantly speaks of the Gods, the elements, and of hierarchy. Ironically, this promoted a sense of community in the audience as they were part of the invocation to portals above and below. Somehow this verticality was more intense in the PuG, probably due to the narrower configuration. Conversely, the PuG felt less intimate than London's Globe. Although smaller, the acoustics did not invite connection, but had to work harder on placement and volume. I did not think this was an improvement on the London's Globe's renowned ability to glide from intimate to epic in the glint of an actor's eye.

Watching the audience sensibilities that emerged through the season at the PuG, I observed that the creative muscle of the space, actors, and most of all audience grew very fast. Creative 'responsibility' - or the ability to respond reciprocally and with presence - confidence, and mutuality came to the fore of the theatrical experience on offer to elicit a unique kind of performance confidence - democracy, if you like.

The theatre of the space lent itself to some tricks; when Cleopatra says 'let him every day have a several greeting or I'll unpeopled Egypt' I have letters dropping from the top balconies as the actors sing. When Antony was hauled up onto the monument, I had the audience do this from the pit to the stage with 2 of the actors. Gradually, as the play went

ton, we coaxed the audience into a complicit act of co-construction. This is the greatest gist of such a space.

These performances also crystallised a postcolonial sense of 'wild' or untamed theatre - albeit linked to expected notions of open-air stage Shakespeare - that had boundaries in time and space to answer a call to connect the present with the past in multi-faceted ways. This construct combined history, spectacle, 'truth', and most all, the longing to create and remember a unique experience. My own reflection suggests that the creation of this temporary Globe and our production within it ultimately underline elements of structured belonging that follow chronological stochasticism and theatrical diaspora, and that contribute to the discourse on how the practices of art and our ways of interpreting art have shaped and is shaping society and how we present, critique, and engage with the forces defining our current understanding of the nature of and the challenges facing the future of democracy as a core organising principle of both society and performance.

Very early in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare gives Antony these rather extraordinary lines. He takes the open air stage and says to Cleopatra (and perhaps us the audience):

Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall. **Here is my space.**
Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man. **The nobleness of life**
Is to do thus (1.1)

When working on this text with 2 of my actors in rehearsal on this show, we were struck by the meta-theatre of the text; the resonance of saying these lines in the Popup Globe was impossible to ignore.

In a black box theatre which could be likened to the confines of Antony's Rome, his lines stray from the deep resonance they have in an open-air space like the one so lovingly recreated here in Auckland. 'Here is my space' surely connects to the actor's 'Egypt', the wild open air stage, on which we performed with a seeming sense of newfound freedom. The payoff of saying that line in the PuG was immense. Antony rejoices in his assertion that 'The nobleness of life/ is to do thus', and so the actor can immediately claim not only their rightful space, but apportion a value to performance itself above the imperialist doctrines of 'kingdoms' that are merely 'clay'. We as 2 actors and a director in a hall on a hot Wednesday evening in Point Chevalier discovered an immediate - perhaps imagined - but I like to think not altogether too-obscure connection to Shakespeare's performance space itself, and the craft of performance, in these lines. Something immediately magical happened as a portal between Shakespeare's imagined conditions of production opened up and we relished the met-theatre of it all.

My paper comes from the investigative palette of a director who has an eternal fascination with the OPEN AIR STAGE; to me, Shakespeare's theatre is an actor's theatre; it is the great eternal and external landscape of the actor's inner self. The open-air stage space forces you to know your stagecraft and then to break the rules; to understand the story, to

focus intently on the moments that need pace or space, and those that demand focus, and to marry that with the breadth of the imagination. I don't like blocking - I don't really trust it as a way to engender the maxim that 'acting is reacting' - but as a director in this space you have to set up specific locales with stage left/ stage right being representative of, for example, Rome and Egypt, and then have enormous faith that your actors can carry the story in a connected, seemingly improvised way so that the audience is carried along with the players.

Part of what I wanted to do with this production at the PuG was (1) encounter the enormous capacity for levity and breadth in this wonderful play and on Shakespeare's open air stage, and (2) secondly, to offer some pathways for igniting the kind of immediate connection so important in an open air stage.

Of course, what will strike you most about this Pop- Up Globe is its roughness; The communal nature of that space: "audience" cf. "spectator" or "congregation". Thrust space in the round. Use of the imagination is demanding in a particularly visceral way.

Working on *an open-air stage* also demands an engagement with a play that was very mythic, at times naturalistic, very rich in the imaginative landscape. You don't need much to create this except suggest of locale and invoking the audience's imagination through language.

Key features:

(1) There is enormous capacity for levity and breadth in this play and on Shakespeare's open air stage. The imagination is the real set piece, and it demands audience complicity - not just engagement - as language is the pathway into the mind's eye.

(2) The actor/audience relationship is central to how the story is told. Precise relationships with the audience need to match objectives of each scene. You need to be specific - there is no such thing as an audience. They are a group of individuals, all visible, all complicit with the drama, all having different experiences of the story. This diversity makes the audience members very alert to each other. In great productions, a sense of watching others in consort with the actors around the space starts to happen.

(3) Audience co-construct the story. The groundlings in particular.

'I think the extraordinary effect of groundlings on any performance is owing to the particular combination of being visible, being close to the stage, standing up and being packed together closely.' (Tim Carroll)

(4) The weather dictates how people listen. A hot day will bring a different sensibility compared to a rainy afternoon. I am always struck by how affected the storytelling needs to be in relation to the elements.

(5) To offer some pathways for igniting the kind of immediate connection so important in an open air stage.

(6) What is stochastic behavior?

The word "**stochastic**" means "pertaining to chance" (Greek roots), and is thus used to describe subjects that contain some element of random or **stochastic behavior**. For a system to be **stochastic**, one or more parts of the system has randomness associated with it.

(7) Audience mis-behaving. Teaching them that it's ok to laugh, to weep, to lean on the stage.

(8) All this means that we are looking for clues for the revitalization of theatre and the shared experience. Response-ability

All this suggests a certain contemporaneity with the text. All figures of speech need to connect with the audience:

Verse

Prose

Rhetoric= the Art of Persuasion

Dialogue

Soliloquy - playing to the audience at the Globe Theatre

'The freedom of the artist' (Deleuze and Guattari) not to align to any one doctrine or dogma. This is the real secret of this space.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

The chance to take an epic, very 'filmic' play with 38 characters that usually takes 4 hours to do and perform it in 90 minutes with 18 actors playing 22 characters, was a satisfying challenge. To get inside this amazing play I expanded its episodic feel into a heavily-cut, end-on, semi-Brechtian version that I originally directed at Unitec here in Auckland. I started with the 'nugget' or what I see is at the core of the play. To me, this is an intimate yet wide-ranging story about the manifestation of two opposing forces that exist in all our lives; love and fear. Everything stems from that.

This play has always struck me as the ultimate story of dichotomies that clash and attract; repulsion and desire, male and female; East and West, emotion and reason, love and fear. This was the thematic template for us to explore the staging of these attributes with minimal set.

And, of course, mythology also looms over the play. In this great tragedy, Shakespeare offers us two titans of characters who retain a kind of illustriousness and can be summoned to life in our imaginations. We know and understand these archetypes. They

are the ultimate star-crossed lovers. Cleopatra is a 'lustful gypsy' who rules expertly as the 'Serpent of Old Nile' and is arguably the world's first celebrity; Antony is 'the triple-pillar of the world transformed into a strumpet's fool'. Brangelina springs to mind. Yet although their personalities are vast and parts of their story are easily beckoned, both characters were real people who made real choices and experienced the consequences in real time. I tried to retain this sense of intimate, actual humanity in this work.

In the process of cutting the play down, I also wanted to highlight the two different worlds inhabited by our 'Romans' and 'Egyptians'. The Soothsayer characters have been brought out with more attention to underline the different attitudes towards the spiritual domain in both places. There was a scene inserted from John Dryden's *All for Love* that brings Octavia and Cleopatra into close contact and it feels like the missing scene from Shakespeare's play. Some characters have been merged into one, while others have been completely cut. I took huge liberties with the play. My approach is indebted to the work of Mike Alfreds and I to try to liberate the actor; using a kind of hybrid creative-interpretation-mixed-with-textual-fidelity, I want Shakespeare to be understood and 'alive' as if it was written yesterday.

A note on the text: some history

In staging this radically-cut and altered text, we have had to constantly ask who 'Rome' or 'Egypt' might be in a contemporary setting. So, many choices are suggestive rather than literal.

Set design

The play is quite filmic with scenes that happen in quick succession, so I have had to rethink the relationship with the audience. Who are they? The court of Egypt? The rabble of Rome? I reclaimed certain characters who therefore have a direct relationship with the audience;

- Eros as a boy-singer and confidante to Antony
- the Soldier character who challenges Antony's decision to fight by sea at Actium. This is a key turning-point
- the clown who brings in a 'snake' at the end of the play. This character appears in a street scene earlier in the play
- 2 children of the court - calling them Lotus and Petra - to highlight the familial nature of Egypt
- Menacrates and Menas - who became Scottish pirates in our version

Between each act we had a unique composition of lines from selected Sonnets to segue into the next section. These were sung in Latin, English, or Arabic. I was interested in the sound (music) of the play from the point of view of 'Everyman' telling the story. The Soothsayer starts the play with 3 beats of the Celtic drum - they finish it accordingly.

SHOWS PICTURES OF THE SHOW

And, on that note, I'm going to finish this paper.

Thank you for listening
Nga mihi nui

Tena koutou katoa