

All texts on the following pages were originally created for the *SPILL: Overspill Blog* in 2007 and 2009. They have been selected for inclusion here by *SPILL Festival* in 2021. These texts were written independently of *SPILL*, but now stand as an important part of the broader archive of those early festivals. The texts are reproduced here with the kind permission of Mary Paterson from *Open Dialogues*. Sincere thanks to all the writers whose work is shared here. The *SPILL: Overspill* blog is at <http://spilloverspill.blogspot.com>

SPILL: OVERSPILL

CRITICAL WRITING IN RESPONSE TO THE SPILL FESTIVAL

In 2007, as part of Live Art UK's Writing From Live Art, Rachel Lois Clapham and Mary Paterson wrote responses to the *SPILL Festival*. For 2009 Mary and Rachel Lois were back, collaborating as *Open Dialogues*, with a new and improved *SPILL: Overspill*.

SPILL: Overspill was a tailor-made critical writing programme, designed by *Open Dialogues* and produced in association with *Pacitti Company*. The programme was located at the heart of the *SPILL Festival* and explored the event of criticism in relation to performance.

The aim of *SPILL: Overspill* was to respond critically to the work shown, and to create a realtime discursive context for the *SPILL Festival*: one that spilt out of the usual confines of a festival to a diverse UK and international audience.

The methodology

Open Dialogues works from a position of reciprocity with art and artists in which criticism or critical writing is an intellectual encounter between writing and art. It is writing on, for, about, and as art. *SPILL: Overspill* was produced within this methodology and was overtly embedded, collaborative, critical and located in close proximity to performance. The *SPILL: Overspill* programme explored this relationship and its critical implications.

The community

The *SPILL: Overspill* community consisted of 8 London based writing and performance practitioners. Together, the group gained access to behind the scenes and rehearsal sessions, developed collaborations with individual festival artists, devised textual interventions, took part in *SPILL Think Tank* activities and published writing in response to the festival. The writing appeared on the blog, in the *SPILL Festival* publication *On Agency*, and in a range of UK and international journals.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in these texts are independent of the festival and its organisers.

Contact

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2007

Overspill 2007

Interview - Mary Paterson + Robert Pacitti

Robert Pacitti is the Artistic Director of Pacitti Company, and the Festival Director of SPILL. He's been making work for twenty years, and has won over twenty awards; he's been supported by LADA, was the first recipient of a Time/ Space Fellowship from King Alfred University College, Winchester, and is a co-founder of the New Work Network. No stranger to success, then. Neither, you'd have to assume, is he someone with a lot of time on his hands.

So what made him produce the SPILL Festival? And, given the fact that there are three shows by Pacitti Company in the Festival, how does the event affect his position as a maker of work?

Robert Pacitti doesn't hide the fact that SPILL is a platform for his work. There is nothing like it in London - Lift comes close, of course, but it doesn't support the work that Pacitti would like to see supported. He describes Lois Keidan's directorship of the ICA as 'halcyon days', but points out that Live Art programmes are sustained by individuals, not institutions. Nowadays, the ICA's programme of Live Art has almost ground to a halt, and there's no obvious venue for performers to gravitate towards. On top of this, Pacitti says, Arts Council funding has been 'historically and accidentally' divisive – applications must be made under either 'theatre', 'visual arts' or 'combined arts'. The result is a stratified system of presentation and funding that doesn't reflect the boundaries crossed by the work.

But the three venues participating in SPILL, Pacitti hopes, will go some way to redressing this specialisation. He hopes that audiences will go to more than one venue, and points out that audience development works both ways: the venues hope to attract more and diverse audiences through SPILL as much as SPILL hopes to through the venues. On the day after Raimund Hoghe's performance at the Barbican, Pacitti was pleased to note the 'older, monied' audience. Naturally, he'd like to court these types of people (although such a fast-selling show begs the question – were these really new audiences, or Hoghe aficionados?), but while it's easy to imagine Shunt regulars going to the Barbican or Soho Theatre, it's not so easy to imagine some types of Barbican regular enjoying an evening at Shunt.

And yet the difference in venues is not just about bringing in visitors. Each location, Pacitti says, will bring its own angle to the work shown. The 'edginess' of some work might have a particular thrill at the Barbican; the formal innovation of other pieces could present a new direction at Soho Theatre; and while you might expect to see

challenging work at Shunt, Pacitti hopes the parity with the other, more established venues will lend the work and its situation a kind of credence.

Robert Pacitti is drawn towards a 'dirty word' in Performance Art circles: 'Community Art'. SPILL is about working with people, art that involves conversations and the working through of conflicts. It's a principle that also runs through Pacitti Company's 'Finale' pieces, performances the company creates with local artists when they perform overseas. Many of the artists programmed into SPILL have come through this process with Pacitti Company – a curatorial premise that also means there is a real international flavour to the event. And there will be a 'Grand Finale' to close the festival, created along the same lines.

Nevertheless, SPILL remains Robert Pacitti's initiative. As in the 'Finale' shows, he is the artistic director, he has the final say. He's chosen artists who are 'socially engaged', and interested in 'the politics of representation'. The Sunday and Monday SPILLs, for example (showcases of a variety of work, from 5pm to 11pm over the Easter weekend), have an emphasis on work relating to the body: Eve Bonneau, Andrew Masseno, Hancock and Kelly. But this interpretation can also be subjective – Raimund Hoghe does not describe his work as about disability, although the use of his own body often invites the description. And SPILL does not just feature artists who have an obvious thematic or working relationship with Pacitti himself. Given the circumstances, he argues, how could he not invite a company like Forced Entertainment to perform? 'I had a wish list of maybe ten artists', Pacitti says, 'which was only capped by money.'

So does this mean that Pacitti, and his theatre company, are becoming mainstream? Are they positioning themselves at the centre of a new visibility for performance art in this country? There are, after all, plans for at least one more SPILL Festival in 2009. Pacitti sees the relationship between 'mainstream' and the 'edge' as like that between tectonic plates - constantly shifting - and emphasises the fact that he is 'in service' to the other artists involved. In any case, does it matter? Those categories rarely mean anything to the people who are in them, and they are never set in stone.

It does raise the question, though, of what Robert Pacitti's role in all this is likely to be. He's the first to admit that, though happy to work in the service of others to produce SPILL, he is first and foremost a maker himself. After the 2009 SPILL he'll reflect on what he wants to do – concentrate on his own company or continue behind the scenes. And, straight after the Festival is all cleared up, Pacitti Company are beginning a five-week tour of Italy: Robert is clearly not abandoning his craft.

Robert Pacitti describes the process of creating the festival as 'human' and 'intuitive'. Now, with the support of venues, press and the art world, it's tempting to ask why nobody's done it before. The fact is, they did not, so SPILL is here. And, flavoured by Robert Pacitti's tastes as it is, it's a welcome arrival to the city.

Mary Paterson is a writer and producer, and Co-Director of Open Dialogues.

Overspill 2007

Rachel Lois - Kira O'Reilly: 'Untitled (Syncope)'

From the far end of a row of old railway arches underneath London Bridge station a white shape looms slowly out of the darkness. It slowly moves towards us. We strain to see more clearly but the shape is only glimpsed occasionally when shafts of light fall through the gaps in the surrounding arches. Eventually I make out the back of a figure. It is Kira and she is completely naked except a pair of red shiny stilettos and a black feather headdress.

It takes at least 7 minutes for Kira to move from her end of the corridor to ours. Once she has arrived, smiling seductively, into our midst she singles out one unsuspecting member of the audience and leads him into the adjoining arch. We follow. From there, the audience witness several acts, including Kira gently self-cutting with a scalpel and stepping to a metronome beat in a variety of taut, automaton style movements whilst straining and teetering on her red high heels.

There are many visual signifiers embedded within Kira's physical actions. The rigidity of her body and blank facial expression recall the military: be it the daily exercises of North Korean soldiers or the exacting motions of a 1970's Russian gymnast. In addition, the strict rhythm set by the metronome emphasises the impossible task of the body inhabiting, but moreover keeping up with, today's technological pace. Light is also thoughtfully installed and used to great effect in 'Untitled (Syncope)', creating pronounced areas of darkness and invisibility under each arch into which Kira moves to signal the different parts of the performance. This 'off stage' facility heightens the contrast between Kira's stilettoed robotics and the second part of the performance in which she emerges from the dark minus stilettos and headdress to complete a series of repeated and slower balancing acts. Yet despite these poetic distractions my thoughts return continually to Kira's naked body.

The naked body is part and parcel and *raison d'être* of performance art. Its use can be traced back in its various guises of 'Body Art' via women artists such as Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramovich and Annie Sprinkle, amongst others, and further back to the work of the 1960's Viennese Actionists. But despite its familiarity within performance and live art circles the naked body is still a shock for most people-including me- to see. In the case of 'Untitled (Syncope)' the shock of Kira's nakedness derives in part from the industrial architecture that surrounds her creamy white body; her nakedness is vulnerable and fragile within the harsh context of the abandoned warehouse space that is London Bridge Railway arches and every train that rumbles overhead threatens her soft flesh.

The other shock regarding the nakedness in 'Untitled (Syncope)' is much more theoretical, albeit cultural. Kira's use of red stilettos and 1930's burlesque type headdress set her up as a sex object or pin up for the gaze of her male and female spectators alike. This presentation of the female body is far removed from many of

the iconic performance documentation images of the 1970's in which the necessarily overt feminist statements contain a more 'nude', natural and defiantly full body-haired woman. In contrast-and here I feel I break the taboo of Performance Art by detailing the performers nakedness- Kira's pubic hair is shaved into a severe contemporary style, her underarm hair is removed and she wears red stilettos. In this way her body is more akin to pole dancing or porn. This is perhaps the salient point of 'Untitled (Syncope)'; the difference between Feminism and the representation of female body, then and now.

It is important that Kira, both as artist/subject and object, is willingly and knowingly interpreted in this way, ie sexually. Her provocative smiles at close range with the audience confirm this knowledge. In addition, Kira overtly references her nakedness at one point in the performance by firmly clasping her front and back nether-regions and stalking dramatically off stage into the darkness as if suddenly aware for the first time of her own public and very sexual naked body.

The last line in the photocopy distributed at the performance asks 'How to have a body, now?' Kira seems to be dealing directly with this very question of (female) representation and thus it is important that 'Untitled (Syncope)' is a work that grapples openly with the problematic of its own erotics.

Rachel Lois xx

Rachel Lois is Co-Director of Open Dialogues.

Overspill 2007

Mary Paterson - Kira O'Reilly: 'Syncope'

Kira O'Reilly walks towards us slowly, and backwards. We, the audience, have been herded through the vast, dark and damp vaults at Shunt to witness this mesmeric entrance. Kira is naked apart from red high heels and a black feathered headdress, like a showgirl. The lights emphasise the curves of her body as she emerges, cautiously, from the darkness.

As she gets nearer, we can see that we're not the only people watching. The naked showgirl holds a mirror in front of her face so that she sees us approach just as we see her. She moves closer, the sound of her heels on the stone floor suddenly louder than the sound of other people breathing. And, when she's close enough to touch, she gazes at each of us in turn through her mirror. We are finally confronted with the face behind the body.

The encounter is unsettling. Up to that point we were free to gaze at O'Reilly's beautiful figure, but now it has been given agency – literally, a mind of its own. And

having introduced the concept, O'Reilly spends the rest of the performance questioning who or what that agency means.

When she leads an audience member, by the hand, into the darker recesses of the vaults, we all follow. When she moves rapidly around the space we clamber after her and out of her way. When she disappears into darkness at the end of the performance, we are bereft for a moment, at a loss as to what to do. Clearly this body has power – we're drawn to watching it move. And the allure is intended – framed in the showgirl costume and all the more erotic for its contrast to the grimy surroundings. But it doesn't look as if these productions of the body stem from Kira O'Reilly herself. The heels and headdress are the traditional accessories of someone else's (a paying customer's) sexual desire, and even the way O'Reilly moves seems to be guided by a something separate. She changes location, for example, by placing both hands on one waist and dragging herself around. Her hands cast long shadows over her body and take her in ways she doesn't seem to want to go – they don't look like they belong to her. At other times she moves her arms up and down like a puppet at the whim of a clumsy puppeteer, her eyes staring straight and stonily ahead. By keeping her face blank – the same face we saw eye us with weary suspicion at the beginning of the piece – O'Reilly takes on the function of a doll without any of the associated artifice. In other words, she tolerates the manipulation but she doesn't play along.

But this is not a simple dramatisation of resistance. The hidden controller can never be named, so s/he can't be rallied against and overturn. In any case, the piece suggests this control can't be separated from the body it's controlling.

The only acoustic accompaniment to O'Reilly's performance is the strict metronome beat of a ticking clock, by which all her movements are timed. Is this the drumbeat of someone else's time? Or is it O'Reilly's own pulse, racing and slowing as she completes her routine? It doesn't matter which it is, only that it governs how O'Reilly can move.

After a while, some audience members start moving to its rhythm as well – we've all internalised this discipline. This is the lasting impression that makes the piece so successful - the nagging feeling that we're all complicit, that perhaps we're all being manipulated. And the transposition of what's happening to the performer onto what's happening to us is emphasised, again, in O'Reilly's exit. She leaves the way she came in - but this time she's facing us. Slowly, elegantly, she fades into the darkness like a dream, or a thought from our own minds.

Mary Paterson is a writer and producer, and Co-Director of Open Dialogues.

Overspill 2007

Rachel Lois – 'Covet Me, Care For Me'

'Covet Me, Care For Me' is Sheila Ghelani's two room live installation situated inside the underground maze of Shunt Vaults. In comparison to the dirty industrial installation or performance spaces that surround it, Sheila's space resonates with care and-hoping this isn't too cheesy- love. The tiny rooms are well lit, snug and have music playing. In addition to that Sheila is physically present within the installation and tending to her room in a rather glamorous 1950's silk housecoat. There is even evidence that she has actually swept up. But don't be fooled. This attention to detail does not stem from Sheila being house proud, overly domestic - or a woman- it is carefully and deliberately constructed to evoke a sense of comfort, nostalgia and the maternal for her visitors. As such, the setting is dangerously seductive, what Sheila really wants from us is our participation in her plan.

Sheila's agenda is stated upfront on a notice just inside the entrance to the installation "Will you wear me? Will you care for me? Will you covet me?, Will you love me?" and then the key question "Will you take me home?" The installation 'Covet Me, Care For Me' is hereby revealed as the cosy and respectable front for Sheila's plot to influence the hearts, minds and homes of anyone who will agree to smash the heart-shaped glass casings, and then take home, one of the 100 plastic trinkets on display. Sheila's agenda is, ultimately, to infiltrate the world of the precious, old and valuable with her small plastic ribbons and retro 1950's nurses badges. The idea being that these cheap, low brow or 'mongrel' objects of questionable provenance will eventually- and rightfully - appear in posh vintage clothing stores, antique shops, ethnographic displays and museum collections.

Sheila admits it's unlikely that her treasures will end up in such places. There are too many market technicalities to consider: when examined by future dealers or enthusiasts the dubious origins of her items will surely come straight back to Sheila and thus, as a nice aside, providing a powerful marketing tool and performance document for 'Covet Me, Care For Me'. Nevertheless, it is subversive and fun to imagine these kitsch bits and bobs arriving onto the hollowed ground of The British Museum or The Antiques Roadshow. 'Covet Me, Care For Me' hints at discourses concerning the attribution of value and a gift economy but what matters most is the contract of desire: for those who took them, these objects must be loved and I'm sure they will be.

Rachel Lois is Co-Director of Open Dialogues.

Overspill 2007

Preview: Feast anxiety

Each week of the festival there is a 'Feast', a dinner for a limited number of SPILL audience members and artists. I've not spoken to anyone who has eaten at one of these yet, (please post a comment if you have: what happened to you? did everyone survive?)

Im dining with SPILL on the 12th. My worry is not the food, but the fact that live artists can be unpredictable in the sense that their work necessarily leaks into their non-work (is there such a thing) life in fascinating and engaging, sometimes frightening ways. Over the course of a few brief years i have been surprised by Live Art/Artists on many occasion in what i thought was a non-performance, personal or private situation. Nothing, it seems, is out of reach of live art happenings, and i think this is a good thing, but it does play on my nerves.

The ticket sales lady at the Soho Theatre shared my doubts when i booked my Feast ticket. 'You are brave booking for that' ... (dear god what have i done). So, what will happen on Thursday? Will i be eating with anyone I have seen naked? (answer: most definitely). Will anyone do anything 'weird' that transgresses the boundary of normal dinner behaviour (probably, but let it not be me). All these things and more i shall find out on Thursday -and post them here on Friday pm. Despite the nerves i'm looking forward to it.

ps. If you see me on Thurs, please say hello!

Rachel Lois is Co-Director of Open Dialogues.

Overspill 2007

SPILL Feast in association with New work Network

I'm happy to report I had a great time at last nights Feast and, contrary to my initial worry, there were no irregular or performative interventions hidden amongst unsuspecting diners' food. It was simply good old fashioned eating and drinking on a 50ft long banqueting table on-stage in Toynbee Studios' Theatre.

Given that eating was the central act of the evening, I feel compelled to tell you what we actually ate: the Feast's main course was a selection of fresh, homemade Mediterranean style food including chickpea and olive salad, couscous, vegetable flatbreads, grilled chicken breasts and fresh salmon rolls with tartar sauce, amongst others. For dessert there were large slices of chocolate gateaux, strawberry cheesecake and fruit. There was also a complimentary after-dinner drink of Cognac and Baileys. (Yum) For those of you who are yet to dine with SPILL it was well worth the money.

Despite live art circles being quite tight - this not necessarily through any want of being a clique or niche but perhaps more to do with how Live and performance work is classified, (under) funded and publicised - there were lots of new faces and friends to be made at Feast. I sat down in between Charlie Fox (artist and producer) and visual artist Marcel Berlangier (co-collaborator with sister Francoise Berlangier of 'Penthesilea'). Conversation flowed freely, but had it not, there were small conversational prompts made available by our artist-hostesses. These were printed cards with questions such as 'What is the longest durational performance you have ever seen?' or 'What is most important or exciting thing about Live Art for you?'

Aside from the cards, the other overt reference to this event being different to an archetypal 'feast' was that prior to entering the theatre-cum-dining-room every guest was given a single rose: white for SPILL artists, red for everyone else. The significance of marking us this way was to enable people to make connections and put artists' names to faces. Such touches reference the fact that although Feast is not staged as a performance per se it is, of course, knowingly and carefully scripted for maximum effect within the context of the SPILL Festival.

The SPILL and New Work Network recipe for Feast is a simple and effective one, designed to deliver the real business of the evening. The aim is to stage a space for informal debate, to create a community and to break down the boundary between performer and audience whilst simultaneously introducing new people to the genre via cheap and tasty food. It also gives artists the all too rare chance to meet and socialise properly with their public and as such Feast is an important addition to the festival programme.

Rachel Lois is Co-Director of Open Dialogues.

2009

Overspill 2009

The Porcelain Project: a (mis)communication across objects and space

With Grace Ellen Barkey

Initiated by Mary Kate Connolly and Eleanor Hadley Kershaw

Grace Ellen Barkey and Eleanor Hadley Kershaw take a seat at a table outside the Waterside Café, Barbican. The fountain on the other side of the patio is gushing and people at other tables chatter happily over coffee in the afternoon sunshine. Eleanor places a tape recorder on the table between her fizzy water and Grace's tea. They start to discuss Spill: Overspill and The Porcelain Project. The conversation quickly turns to the story of the performance's evolution.

Grace: I work quite intuitively. I don't really think beforehand, "what does it mean?". I consider it more like when a painter paints. Just go [*she makes a hand gesture to suggest throwing*] with the paint and the white thing. You have all your luggage with you, all your knowledge and your life and your dreams and you just go for something...

I always tell the story that Lot, my partner in crime, and me, we were having a bit of time off... and we decided to do something small. Lot was a ceramicist, but she hadn't practiced for years and years and I don't know why but she started to study it again. I am a very big fan of porcelain, I just love to touch it, and in a flea market I always go to the cups. I have a whole collection of the most fragile cups, the more fragile the better. I think we [envisioned] a picture of a Louis XIV-style room - a room full of porcelain - and we said to each other, let's do something with it.

For me, theatre is a puppet theatre, in the sense of the absurdity and the grotesque nature of a puppet play; [where there might be] a kind of strange repeating, like "children did you see...", and then something pops up there [*she makes a hand gesture like a hand-puppet popping up*]. I said to Lot, let's make a puppetry of porcelain, but really recognisable things like cups. So Lot started to make all the pottery. [We built] a little temple; on this platform there were porcelain things standing and hanging, and we would pull on wires and all these [pieces of porcelain] would move. For example, there's this snake of cups moving [*she makes a hand gesture to suggest a rolling wave*]. It's just like a dream of little objects moving. We still show it sometimes in museums, this little manipulation of the porcelain, it takes like 10 minutes. So that's how it started...

And when it was my turn to do a big production, at first we had another idea for a setting, but because we had so much porcelain we said, "we have spent so much time already with this porcelain, so let's just throw it on the big stage and see what happens..." And that's how it grew.

Eleanor: Is the relationship between the audience and the porcelain the same in the installation and in the performance?

Grace: It's completely different. The trembling table that you see on stage is also in the installation. When it starts the people come in and they see all this porcelain falling and they can come much closer, they can express their curiosity differently. They go and look at the table and try to figure out "why does it tremble?" and "how does the porcelain fall?". They are already completely into it before we even start the manipulation. And during the manipulation they come very close, very very close. It's very light. And the porcelain has a quality, it's very tender, it is beautiful. The music of it is tender.

In the show, we have this poetry of the porcelain in the temple, but I also wanted to show another side of it. It's more absurd when a body carries the porcelain. When

you have a porcelain nose you're immediately a clownesque person. These objects become a part of the body but at the same time they are more like an aggressive outburst of the body. You want to touch another body but because of the porcelain it's an impossibility: I wanted to play with this impossibility.

Eleanor: One of the things that we noted in the performance is that the porcelain is not porous, there's no way of getting through it. It feels like it's getting between these bodies. We wondered whether you see the porcelain as something completely exterior; external to the body? Or do you see it as a representation of something more internal?

Grace: Of course, it's not only an external thing. When you make theatre you are instantly telling something, in some way, even if the performance is abstract. You have the space, you have the time, you have the whole aspect of theatre: you are telling a story. What I try to do together with the dancers and Lot, is to create something new.

To trigger fantasy, to show that you can come up with something that doesn't exist yet. The material and what I try to say grow together in relation to each other; it is something that I completely trust. It will tell a story whether you want it to or not - it is there. I sometimes say it's kind of a meditation. To create something, you just have to go into it and try to open yourself to all the possibilities. And of course I have limited time with the dancers, I don't have years and years. So I have to begin with an idea and very soon they start to understand, and come into my meditation too. We are working together, and this whole new world grows.

Eleanor: The porcelain seems to almost create a language of its own – how would you describe this language? Would it be very formal and ornate, or sketchy and in note form, or something else entirely?

Grace: I'm not so good in words, I really think in images. If it is a language it is a physical one, and of course there's the sound that the porcelain makes. This is almost like a presence for me. The porcelain as an image is very present and I am always surprised to hear it. It's such a beautiful gift of the porcelain to make sound.

Eleanor: As much as I enjoyed the performance I also found it quite unsettling, specifically when thinking about the colonial connotations of the porcelain...

Grace: My work is really about the absurd and the grotesque: the poetry of the theatre, the mythical figures that represent the good and the bad. The mythical figure becomes human, and the human figure fails. It is always disturbing and always funny to see human people trying to communicate and failing. And along with the porcelain, the mythical figures and the kings are an excuse to trigger something; to do something else with time, with material, to play, to invent. So the kings were a fascination because it's such a terrific question – what is it to be a king? It's a shame

that there are no good kings any more. A good king should be on the square every Sunday and... dance for the people [*laughs*]... And why do all these kings go so crazy? To go so far in their rituals and to get so caught up with this absurd life they're living.

Eleanor: This really came across in the performance – they're so overindulgent and decadent that their world just falls apart and becomes chaotic...

Grace: And at the same time it's a fairytale, the king and the princess and the frog.

Eleanor: And in creating the show you were "playing" and you see theatre as puppetry. As an audience member, you get the sense that these beings on stage are almost like children, in the way that they're teasing each other. They often look at us for our approval; they're playing to us. I felt very implicated; that they might not be doing that if I wasn't watching. And when the movement becomes disturbing and sexual, I felt responsible for this descent into chaos. It's a very interesting relationship that the performers establish with the audience by continuously looking back to us.

Grace: It's a weird choice to make: are we going to look or not? And that's why we put what we call "soldiers" [*line of tall vases*] at the front of the stage, so that they can't come out, so that they can't escape. So that we ask the audience just to look and say "what the fuck are they doing?!" It's important to feel an energy that's completely useless, because that's what we are. You would look down from there [*gestures to sky*] at us and at how we fight each other, and how this one is for this god, and that one is for that god, and the people on the other planets would say "what the fuck are they doing?!".

Eleanor: So you're putting the audience in the position of looking in from the outside, from "outer space".

At the end of the performance one of the vases broke. It was very shocking, and it brought back the idea that the porcelain is so fragile. We wondered whether that moment was intentional?

Grace: No. But every performance something breaks. We don't know when and we don't know why. It can be that something tinkles too hard, or somebody stumbles over something or several things, three or four things.

Eleanor: It really is unpredictable – as life is.

Has something ever broken in a way that has made it difficult for the performance to continue?

Grace: Well if something breaks there is a broom and Misha, in character, can come and clean it up.

Grace and Eleanor continue their discussion while finishing their drinks. They shake hands and smile. Eleanor exits through the café. Grace exits across the patio. A waitress enters from the café door and clears Grace's teacup and Eleanor's water bottle onto a tray, then exits.

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Overspill 2009

An Awful Responsibility by Mary Paterson

Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso

By Romeo Castellucci

The Barbican

At the start of *Inferno*, a line of Alsatians is brought on stage and chained up by the footlights. They bark and growl and snarl at the actor behind them – Romeo Castellucci, the director of this work. Suddenly, like the crack of a whip, a dog runs on from the sides and attacks him; then another; then another. The dogs sink their teeth into Castellucci's padded armour, shake his limbs, pull him to the ground. The Alsatians at the footlights watch with frenzied excitement. Growling, snarling, yelping - they are baying for Castellucci's blood.

There is a violence in the relationship between audience and performer, and Castellucci knows it. He knows that we are watching, waiting, willing something to happen.

In *Inferno* the figure of Andy Warhol – our Virgil, our guide for this trip to the Underworld – points accusingly at the audience as he writhes on stage in agony. He takes our photograph to the sound of an almighty flash, like the sound of worlds breaking.

In *Purgatorio*, the audience is made to feel complicit with a scene of unspeakable abuse. The words of a script are projected onto the front of the stage which, for a while, enacts the audience's control over what we see. We know what the actors will do minutes or seconds before they do it, then watch the inevitable play out like a familiar punch-line. But when the script diverges from the events on stage, this relationship becomes an appalling indictment of the audience's desire for theatre to

perform. Put bluntly, we are waiting for something to happen. If the something that happens is horrific, does that mean our expectation is horrific as well?

In Castellucci's trilogy of heaven and hell the viewers are not just spectators to the worlds conjured up; we conspire in the conjuring act itself. Castellucci creates a waterfall of images laden with meaning, but whose meaning is never resolved. A white horse, covered in red paint, makes a horde of people back away in fear or awe. A woman chops carrots in the stifling, noisy silence of her suburban home. Two fountains of warm water cascade endlessly from a dark vanishing point.

These are symbolic images that symbolise nothing (yet). They are like floating signifiers – terms that mean something, although it is not clear what they mean. In order to make sense of them, the viewer must season these images and wash them down with a few more of her own.

And yet instead of floating, Castellucci's signifiers seem weighted down. They are tied to the reality of theatrical space, to the space of image making that is signified over and over again as each image comes into being. With a set that is heaved and scraped and bumped around, or a mirror that literally reflects the audience onto itself, this is theatre-making that knows it is being made. And it is creation in which the viewer knows she is involved. She watches herself imagining the image at the same time as she explores the resonance of the image itself. She watches herself watching (a scene that represents) abuse, aware that she has called the scene into being.

This is not to say that Castellucci's theatrical worlds begin and end with the viewer. In fact, the visions he creates for *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* don't seem to have a beginning or an end at all.

Inferno sees a mass of people take part in a cycle of life and death from which none can escape. Even after they have all died, and been reborn, and died again (slitting each other's throats with an efficient flick of the wrist); even after an old man begs to be released, the mass of bodies rises again and backs away from the stage like the waves of life, as opposed to the individual living.

Purgatorio re-houses its characters in new bodies, committing them to a process that lasts beyond one lifetime, which is to say, beyond the experience of any body watching.

Paradiso writhes in a perpetual act of becoming. A figure, glimpsed in the obfuscating light of a dark inner chamber, stretches like a butterfly reaching out of its chrysalis. But the figure is always stretching - it never quite breaks free.

Performing this cyclical, continual field of creation, Castellucci's trilogy enacts time and space on a colossal scale. Individual actions are only ever a metaphor or metonym for effects with much larger consequences. In *Inferno*, a basketball

bounces to the sound of catastrophe – crashing, falling, scraping, like metal being compounded or bones being crushed. In *Purgatorio* giant jungle plants revolve slowly until they have engulfed a man's struggle and a boy's imagination. And in *Paradiso* an endless black horizon is contained – impossibly – inside an endless white one. Operating in this cosmic space and time, it is no wonder that the trilogy feels terrifyingly full when it is realised in the mind of a finite individual – a member of the audience.

Push and pull. Creation and destruction. Experience and awe. The cosmic scale and obscure symbolic weight of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* amounts to a slow, metamorphic force that drives and exceeds each component part, a force that is compelled by a shifting power play between the performers - who signal the production of their performance – and the viewers – who acknowledge the production of their view. The enigma at the heart of this work is that, despite its fantastical image-making, despite its endless space and time, despite its awareness of the making of theatre and its collusion with the audience to bring the image to life, the trilogy returns to a theme of visual obscurity. The mysterious white horse in *Inferno* is part obscured by a swinging black circle, like an anti-sun. The cycle of violence and impotent redemption in *Purgatorio* is slowly veiled by a spinning circle of black paint. The twisting figure at the heart of *Paradiso* lives in such darkness that he could be a trick of the eye.

Paradiso is, then, (only) as heavenly as your imagination, *Purgatorio* (only) as (ir)reconciled, *Inferno* (only) as hellish. Seeing these images is not to know them, but watching them is to make them exist. Like forgotten spirits, they spin in their eternal worlds until they are called back to life by the strength of a viewer's belief.

It is tempting to read the recurring obfuscation as an act of violence from the performer, directed back to the audience in order to protect the integrity of the theatrical whole: it will never be owned or contained by a single point of view. But in fact this obfuscation acts like a kind of pathway. These gaps in vision are stepping stones for the audience's imagination; they let us know that the grand scale of this trilogy requires us to step inside, to acknowledge our collusion, to understand the imposition of a human-centric viewpoint on the chaos of the world. And this viewpoint is the source of the violence in the relationship between performer and performed-to. By creating one image we destroy another; Castellucci does not let us forget this awful responsibility. In *Inferno*, red flames lick the animal curves of a grand piano and make the strings buckle and twang. It is a beautiful and compelling sight. The piano, of course, will never be played again.

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Overspill 2009

Mind The Gap - Robin Deacon's Prototypes by Rachel Lois Clapham

Robert Deacon: Good evening ladies and gentleman. For this evening's performance of Prototypes, I have been commissioned by my son.

Robin Deacon: That's me

Robert Deacon: To play the part of

Robin Deacon: [whispering audibly in Robert's ear] third person omniscient narrator.

Robert Deacon: Third person omniscient narrator.

[Cue Robert on the Xylophone]

And so Robin and his dad, Robert, open the performance of Prototypes with a short turn on the xylophone and an air of formal ceremony.

Prototypes is a show that uses a working model railway as stage for a subtle play on autobiography, documentation and the passing of time. The model in question is a makeshift MDF section of British Rail track that is visible from the upper window in the former home of Robin's Auntie Monica, in 5 Martin Court, Southall. This window was the one in which Robin stood as a child in his school holidays. Where he watched the Class 253 trains in intercity livery pass by. It is where he thinks he may have developed a love of railways and trains – even model ones - and where the fascinations with timetables started.

Robin re-enacts that childhood scene with his model - which includes a hastily blacked-up plastic figurine (representing Robin), stood in front of the cut-out cardboard window of 5 Martin Court watching the model trains. Throughout the performance, he also presents video footage from the original view upon which the prototype is based; we see First Great Western train services rumble past the window of 5 Martin Court, the actual flat from which his Auntie Monica has long since gone. When the trains are gone, the video records the empty, grey and wet stretch of Southall.

Robin wears a pair of dark running shorts and white T-shirt with the word OPERATOR on the back. As 'operator' he spends the first part of Prototypes sitting at a makeshift audio-visual desk at the back of the stage, hidden behind equipment, happily engrossed in twiddling various knobs and widgets relating to the model trains and the on screen video footage. At other times, he runs around the railway's trestle tables an awkward, high legged canter, frantically assembling and disassembling the trains. Robin's operational role on stage troubles the notion of utility versus its excess: performance. It poses the question, is it possible to merely operate or facilitate without performing? So too Robin's operator 'costume' is functional, a

workers uniform or a non-costume, but on stage this very functionality goes beyond appearance, it is seen to appear as performance. These paradoxical acts of erasure provide a glimpse into just how Prototypes - and in general how performance, as opposed to theatre - is complexly embroiled in function and reality. And although it is quite possible that Robin's awkward run could be nothing to do with 'performance' at all, and more to do with Robin's level of physical fitness, I suspect some camping is going on here too.

In contrast to all this (non)performance and train related chaos is Robert who, as third person omniscient narrator- or first person impersonator as he sometimes referred to by Robin- speaks the story of Prototypes with a wry, reserved demeanour that bears an uncanny resemblance to Robin's own understated, satirical persona.

The story Robert tells is one of prototypes themselves - of equivalence, scale, representation and archetypal base form. These things are looked upon through the lens of the model railway, its language, politics and aesthetics. We are taken into the world of the model railway convention, where modellers – the vast majority of whom are white, British, retired enthusiasts - showcase in-depth miniature scenes. The models are strange amalgams; soil collected from the original geographic location, upon which mini lighthouses, railway sheds or outhouses are brought together to create an approximation, a picture postcard of quintessential Englishness. They are fictional but equivalent representations of a certain place and time. Specific re-enactments of an idealised version of the English countryside circa 1950's; a sparsely populated (with white people) land of green and plenty. The prototype that emerges from all these models is troublingly utopian. Prototypes delves into these miniature aesthetics; a world in which 0.5 mm makes a difference, where aged, conservative model makers attempt (unwittingly or otherwise) to simulate a purity of experience, youth and Englishness, and scale things down in an attempt to exercise control over an increasingly uncertain world. Prototypes articulates railway models and their makers as unable to be apolitical, and their endeavours politically loaded. Megalomania and outmoded modernist tendencies concealed in the form of a harmless British past time.

Robin's attempt to place himself (as mixed race, as young man, as artist) in this world - both in the fantasy English landscape of the models, and the world of the typical model railway convention goer – in his re-enactment inevitably fail. But it is the attempt or the acting out of the re-enactment that is critical. It is both political statement and recompense then, that Robin's own model of Southall is very British in an everyday, post industrial way. His is a very different sort of English prototype: one that embodies the fact that quite often 'nothing happens', both in life and on railways, one that takes account of local immigration, (Robin's) mixed British heritage as well as the wet grey reality of Southall.

A similar aesthetics of failure is also being re-enacted in Robin's attempt, mid way through the performance, to simulate the timetabled operations of the 8.59 Network South East service running through Southall on 17 April 1990. It was an

impersonation that was doomed from the start. The vigorous piston movements of his arms, his precise buffering gestures and grinding noises aptly demonstrated the infidelity of representation and the inbuilt failure of re-enactment; it will never copy exactly. But Robin's actions show how re-enactment, in its enthusiastic and imprecise nature, goes beyond off the shelf or pre-fabricated representations or presets - replica trains, crafted figurines, tiny signal boxes - to create something that is more holistic, sympathetic and perhaps more akin to the original event, or prototype. This gap between reality and re-enactment is a recurring motif in Prototypes. At one point, Robin starts the miniature train on its journey past the model no. 5 Martin Court. By the time the train rattles precariously past the prototype window, Robin has (just about) managed to clamber back over the set to stand centre stage in front of the video screen, upon which is a magnified live stream of Robin's on stage Southall prototype. In that carefully choreographed (and nearly missed) moment we watch Robin, his back to us, watching his prototyped plastic self on screen watch the model train. It is a heady mix. One in which Robin views himself through the video projection of his own prototyped past. And we see the dialectical tension between being and self-identification played out through the different forms – body, prototype, video and documentary. First person impersonator, Robert, acts as mediator; he speaks Robin's scripted words as his own. He blackens his (white) face and dons an acrylic afro wig. It is Robert as narrator through which identity is performed as dislocated, fragmented and performative in Prototypes, in short re-enacted, not authentic, essential and whole.

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