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# Audience as Collaborators – Participation in Contemporary Performance and the Effect it has on the Audience

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Audience as Collaborators – Participation in Contemporary Performance and the Effect it has on  
the Audience  
NOAH JORDAN VOELKER

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE  
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## Foreword

In December 2009, I was fortunate enough to attend the Rude Mechanicals' reconstruction of *Dionysus in 69*. At that time I had only begun my research into theatre; I knew only a handful of movements, plays, persons of importance, and seminal works. My reason for attendance was not because I was aware that *Dionysus in 69* is an important work in the history of experimental theatre; and I did not know that it involved legendary amounts of audience participation that challenged those who attended. I simply went because I wanted to see more theatre and I saw that one of my friends on Facebook was attending. That night in December, I was not just blown away by the performance; I was transported. It was not theatre I was seeing, but a series of intense moments I was living with a room of 150+ strangers. Coming out of The Off Center that night I was lost, for theatre had seemed as though a simple thing – there are plays, directors, actors, writers, designers, technicians, and the audience who watches passively. I had the realization that the theatrical event could contain so much more and that the relationship I as spectator had to the performers and the action of the play was open to many possibilities. The energy of *Dionysus* was entirely unlike anything else I had experience in theatre or life. It was a mix of liberation from the quotidian and a tremendous respect of the power of *Dionysus* (or maybe it was for the person playing *Dionysus*; it was unclear).

Following the experience with the performance, I set about researching and reading as much as I could about *Dionysus in 69*, Richard Schechner, The Performance Group, avant-garde theatre, and anything else related. My own work as a director has been focused on the idea of finding different relationships to establish with the audience and to ask them to contribute to the performance. I have a firm belief in the idea that theatre and performance can touch people in ways that other mediums cannot. Theatre relies so much on the present moment and the connections shared between all those

present, regardless of who they are. Participation simply utilizes those connections already in place to bring everyone closer to the event at hand. That, to me, is special and worth investigating.

Why do we as theatre and performance makers bother with the audience? We want someone to see our work. We want those who see it, to connect with or at least garner some sort of message and experience from it. Yet, is there something more that we want from them? Considering the four pieces written about in this thesis as well as other works I have encountered, there is a desire on the part of these artists to establish a connection with their audience that goes beyond the traditional relationship. What is incredible is that audiences have demonstrated, when confronted with pieces that ask them to contribute, their own desire to involve themselves with performances. The greater question is, why now? What about this moment brings the tastes of audiences and artists in line regarding the question of participation?

## Chapter I

### **Asking the Audience to Give More: An Introduction to Participatory Performance Events**

“Theatre is not always make-believe; it can make possible the most important real things that we do.” –

Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater*, 8.

“A theatre that makes no contact with an audience is nonsense” – Bertolt Brecht, *Emphasis on Sport*, 6

What occurs during a performance event when the audience is explicitly invited to contribute something? In many performances, the audience gives quite a bit to the artists by simply acting attentive. Those involved in theatre or the performing arts are keenly aware that the difference between a strong performance and a weak one is determined somewhat by the condition of the audience. The presence of a good audience can carry a performer on his or her worst night. There are some performance events in which the artists will ask the audience members to contribute more than their respectful and attentive presence. A familiar situation occurs when a magician pulls a volunteer up on stage. Another is when characters in a dinner murder mystery show ask the audience who it thinks did the crime. In this thesis I investigate performances that present the choice for audiences to contribute something significant to the event; and by their contribution the entirety of the events is enriched in complex ways that require unpacking. It is also concerned with participation that is not exploitive of the spectators, but rather invites their intelligence. Particularly I am interested in participation which seeks to embellish the audience’s experience, to give the opportunity for spontaneous collaboration, and to provide for everyone at the event the opportunity to exist in the present and highly charged moments of the performance event. What I am looking at is how participation can change the way the audience members writes their experience of performance – the transition from an audience member saying, ‘I saw something that happened’ to ‘I was a part of something that happened’.

In this thesis I examine four performances I have had the opportunity to experience myself: *The Living Room* by the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards; *Dionysus in 69* as recreated by The Rude Mechanicals from the original<sup>1</sup> by Richard Schechner and The Performance Group; *The Cloud* by TheatreGroup Space; and *Now Now Oh Now* by The Rude Mechanicals. Each performance utilizes participation as an essential aspect of how the audience experiences the work and the messages the artists wish to impart. Each goes about using participation in a different fashion and none of the pieces use participation as a novelty; rather, participation is an integral part of the performance so much that without the audience members giving their consent to participate, the pieces would fail to some degree. I therefore discuss the techniques the artists use in order to facilitate fruitful participation. Furthermore, I analyze the complexities associated with each individual performance and how it changes the way in which the audience members create their narrative. The performance events use participatory elements in different ways and to different degrees; however, they all use participation to connect with their audience on a level that presentational performances are not able to reach. A level at which the audience feels comfortable contributing to the event and they know that their presence and participation is essential to the completion of the performance event.

One common thread between the four pieces is that they all find ways of breaking the expectations of the audience so that participation becomes real possibility that the audience members are comfortable committing to. These expectations are the ones most people bring to theatrical events. An example is the sequence of actions of attending a performance: e.g. I will go to a place of performance where I will sit down and then watch the performance. The expectations run like a set of programmed commands for the audience – it is built in behavior by years of training, in a sense, through the attendance of the typical theater as well as the cinema. In the four pieces, expectations are broken

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<sup>1</sup> The Rude Mechanicals titled their recreation *Dionysus in 69 in 09*. I discuss the recreation and implications associated with recreating the devised piece.

very early on so that the audience may have a chance to create new sets of behavior related to the event at hand. Immediately addressing the audience as equals is one technique. Another is asking the audience to actually bring something with them to the performance, such as in *The Living Room* where the audience members are asked beforehand to bring food to share with everyone. They all use the arrangement of the performance space to break the larger expectation of that there is a place for a performance and a place for watching the performance.

### **Liveness, Doubleness and What Constitutes as Valid Participation**

Peter Brook writes that performances are “deliberately constructed social gatherings that seek for an invisibility to interpenetrate and animate the ordinary” (Empty Space, 57). It is easy to see how theatre and performance is, in its essential form, is a tightly constructed event in which people come together to enact a specific set of tasks. In most instances of performances, two parties agree to meet at a particular place time for something to occur – maybe it is at 8PM at the New York Metropolitan or maybe it is at midnight at an apartment where a performance collective is squatting. One group is usually charged with putting on something for the other group to witness and a live exchange happens between the groups. Performance’s ultimately unique quality as an art form is this live exchange, or liveness. It is the ever present dialog between those who are making the art and those who are witnessing the art that makes performance and theatre so full of possibilities. To include participation in a performance is an attempt to utilize the quality of liveness. Participation, however, is not the only way of demonstrating liveness in performance. Spectacle of any kind plays with and touches on liveness, for the audience experience the sensation of thrill when it watches acrobatics, pyrotechnics, light shows, and complex musical numbers. Exploiting or using liveness is when a production or a performance uses an element that highlights how the events are occurring in real time and in conference with the audience. What sets participation apart is that it has the possibility to allow the audience to write part of

the narrative of the performance. When participation is enacted successfully it can demonstrate the relationship between audience and the performance event because the audience members have been given signals that their presence is necessary for the performance to occur. Therefore, participatory elements use the quality of theatre's liveness even more so than spectacle, because the audience moves from primarily observing events to collaborating with the artists on the overall experience of the performance event.

At the core of it, participation in the context of performance gives the opportunity for an audience to write a narrative that is outside the quotidian. It is possible that this new narrative, subjected to the performance event, is not tempered by fragmentation present in everyday life. The audience members are provided with the opportunity to have immediacy with the performance event; and by contributing something to it, they are able to write that the experience was one in which they did something or performed some action that was important to the event. In many performances it is not apparent that the audience is even needed; however, in participatory performances it is clear that the audience is essential in making the event successful. Paul Woodruff in *The Necessity of Theater* writes that a "good watcher knows how to care" and that when Woodruff himself cares about a play he "stay[s] to see how the play turns out because [he] want[s] to know" (149). Participation is about opening up the event to the audience in a way in which their direct action can determine how the performance occurs, both in terms of the overall experience and in some cases the dramatic action. If persons stay to watch a play because they care about the outcome, what then will they do if they have some input in that outcome? Will care move them to action and make them forget that they are at the theater? Will the event become something other than theatre?

Participation manifests a double role for the audience. They are spectators and they are also performer-objects. They become pieces in the active creation of the event and they charged with

moving the performance forward towards its completion. Yet, the audience moves back and forth between the role of spectator and performer-object. Once the idea of participation is present in a performance, each person is worth watching, for every individual has the potential to influence the outcome, even in tiny ways, of the performance event. Still, the audience is there to also watch and take in what the artists have to offer. The doubleness present is indicative of the more active give and take between the audience and performers and it points to how participation holds the possibility of turning the aforementioned meeting of groups into a temporary community who is doing something together.

Participation in theatrical events has garnered a reputation as a way to unfairly exploit the naiveté of audience members. It is sometimes used to pull audience members up on stage so that their peers may laugh at them; it is used to meagerly spice a mediocre performance event to make it appear more dangerous or radical; and it is found in events like in dinner theatre, a form which is highly enjoyable, but lacks a certain goals in the use participatory techniques. Richard Schechner in *Environmental Theater* writes:

Participation is legitimate only if it influences the tone and possibly the outcome of the performance; only if it changes the rhythms of performance. Without this potential for change participation is just one more ornamental, illusionistic device: a treachery perpetrated on the audience while disguised as being on behalf of the audience. (77)

Schechner's definition states the type of participation I will discuss in this study. It is the kind of participation that endows the audience with certain responsibilities. The audience members in these works are not singled out to participate, instead each person is given the same opportunities to contribute to the performance event. The participatory elements in the works I examine at minimum change the rhythms of the performance, such as those in *The Living Room* and *The Cloud*. Some

elements of participation, like those in *Dionysus in 69* in 09 and *Now Now Oh Now* give the audience the possibility to radically alter the dramatic action of the event.

### **A Brief History of the Participating Audience and the Development of the Psycho-Spatial Fourth Wall**

The act of audience becoming a significant part of the performance is not a new idea now, nor was it when it was explored during the avant-garde theatre of the 60's and 70's. Before the transformation of the auditorium of a theater into a dark, comfortable place from which to watch the action on stage like a voyeur, the division between the performance and audience was much less significant if not nonexistent. In the 13th and 14th century, participation was written into some of the passion drama staged in churches and monasteries: audiences followed the drama throughout the space, they were directly addressed, and even commanded to perform actions such as worshipping a Christ figure. The popular theaters in England and on the continent during the Renaissance and after were rife with noise, activity, and spectators exchanging dialog with the actors on stage. Even in the Ancient Greek Theater the audience was noisy and responsive to performers. While this kind of participation is unlike what is explored in the pieces I discuss, there is within legitimate theatre a history of the audience directly involving themselves with the performance event. There is an impulse for people to contribute, but only if they have some knowledge of what they are doing and feel safe in doing it. For French, English, and Greek audiences the behavior of directly responding to the action on stage was built into the theatrical culture they practiced. In more recent history, that impulse has been driven out of the audiences in favor of silent and respectful crowds. This is not to the disadvantage of theatre as a whole; for it allowed playwrights like Shaw, Chekov, and others to have their brilliantly crafted plays exist in a world unto themselves. What is interesting is how the contemporary theatre is rediscovering the impulse and asking how the audiences might involve themselves once more.

As the regular and popular theater became solidified in the arrangement of space and the fourth wall of realistic theater, avant-garde artists began to question such conceptions. The Italian Futurists are known for their repeated attempts to incite volatile audience reactions that include booing, fighting, and rioting if possible. The desire for such violent engagement came from the contempt the Futurists held towards their audiences who they saw as having “no other desire but to enjoy a peaceful digestion at the theater” and therefore unable to appreciate any art – namely their art – which was new, challenging, and sometimes offensive (Marinetti 96). In Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre the audience is regarded as intelligent beings that could relate to the events on stage with feelings other than empathy. Brecht theorized that by recognizing the presence of the audience and destroying theatrical illusion that the theater could move the public to not only change personally, but also to enact radical progressive political change. In the past five decades, artists have studied and challenged the behaviors of the modern and contemporary audience. Groups and artists like The Living Theatre, The Performance Group, Allan Kaprow, and Jerzy Grotowski worked during the 1960s and 1970s on projects that asked the audience to contribute to an event in a particular way that worked toward the overall experience of a performance. Artists have continued to explore the role of the audience, resulting in pieces by groups such as Blast Theory, which resemble alternate reality games rather than theatrical events. This thesis focuses on works which retain elements of theatre in the sense that the artists creating the pieces examined call their work theatre or performance. What I am concerned with is how participatory elements intersect and enrich theatrical elements as well as provide an experience that may cause an audience to become more awake to the present moment.

The history of theatre conventions and the traditions it has bred has led to the development of the psycho-spatial fourth wall: a certain established fear of violating the space occupied by performers even in instances where the performers recognize the presence of the audience. Woodruff states that “theater space has a special feature: in many cases, it cannot be violated and remain as theater space”

(117). He is correct in his assessment of the typical contemporary, pre-modernist, and modernist theater spaces that have defined a certain theater going behavior. An audience member walking onto the stage during a performance of Macbeth would violate the social contract of the theater and disrupt the performance entirely. This would take place in what Schechner terms as the “orthodox theater” or any theater where there is a strict division between the performance area and the watching area (38). Even in instances when a person is invited onstage, such as during a magic show, there is always tension because that person is in unfriendly territory. It is unfriendly because it is marked by the modern history of theater going which reserves particular spaces for actors. Also, the audience member on stage is in danger of the performance turning on them and making them a fool in front of their peers. Instead of the possibility of fruitful collaboration, the chance that the audience member will suffer exploitation becomes the dominant possibility in these sorts of situations. In short, violating the barrier is to take on the risk and responsibilities of the performers without any preparation or invitation to contribute as an equal.

The possibility of participation happens when the psycho-spatial fourth wall is dealt with in the production. The absence of the mental boundaries that prevent the sharing of space means that the space is entirely open and the audience is free to traverse it. This does not mean doing away with fixed places to watch from or areas to perform in. It does mean that the space is shared rather than divided and that the action of performance can occur in spaces in which the audience occupies. When this happens, it signals to the audience that the performance exists all around them and not just at a distance. What can then proceed from a shared space is the chance an audience will respond to invitations to participate for they do not feel there is a psycho-spatial barrier to violate. In the performances discussed, some of the spaces are fully environmental and some are not, however all of the spaces are shared between the audience and the performers which is a major reason why participation is so effective in the pieces.

### **The Fragmentation of Personal Narratives and What Theater can do about it**

Our individual lives are increasingly more and more fragmented which has implications for the way in which our personal narratives are written. The day to day life occurs on several different levels of reality. We have our real life of unmediated interactions, but the immediacy of those actions is tempered. Nearly everyone possesses a cell phone that tends to never leaves their person – as of December 2012, 87% of North Americans own a cell phone and almost half of them are smart phones (Brenner). On each individual's cell phone is a world of text messages, emails, Facebook messages, and other social interactions occurring outside of the normal temporal framework – personal and unmediated social interactions are immediate and occur in real time with segmentation. Now we are subjected to engaging on many social actions which are mediated through cell phones and the internet. These interactions occur constantly over periods of time that might last for a minute to the entire day to even longer; and, we are constantly aware of these interactions and the need to keep up with them. Immediacy in the everyday is a rare thing. Many performances scream to the audience members for them to have presence and immediacy with the event. The sheer act of a person turning off their cell phone for two hours when at the theater seems incredible in the contemporary hyper connected social world.

New social technologies also allow us to curate our narrative like never before and not just the personal narrative each one of us experiences, but the narrative we present to the outside world. Consider Facebook which is used by over half the population of the United States (Social Bakers). The site allows a user to choose any image to display a profile picture – the face which is the star of the narrative written on Facebook. A user is able to select which images they are tagged in or in a sense, they are selecting what scenes that others may read when looking through the user's photos. These scenes tell the story of a person's life and there is pronounced stress in controlling the narrative of that

story – e.g. wanting to appear socially accepted or wanting to appear professional. All personal information, likes, dislikes, and even thoughts are controlled and monitored by the user. This effectively makes their Facebook page a narrative of their self they want others to read. What has developed recently is a new concern of how one appears on social media or, in another sense, concern for how others are reading and interpreting the narratives presented on social media. The narrative a person presents in real life interaction is not as controlled for there is no record that is available for reading at any time. A person cannot change how others remember them and interpret interactions. Therefore, the narrative presented in real life interactions is mostly determined by how the other interprets what actions someone does. There is no way to write and review a cohesive self-narrative that presents a desired message in real life interactions. The possibility does exist in the new social media world. As such, many people today are fragmented in their narratives -- their present life narrative, the one they show in real life interactions, and their various narratives on social media which are controlled.

Participatory theatre fits into all of this because it brings audience members to the present moment and it institutes a temporary super-narrative over everyone. This is not to say the self or the self-written narrative of present life falls away. An audience member who actively contributes to a theatrical event writes their narrative as, 'I am doing something that is a part of this event.' The theatrical event is no longer something distant from them that they are only watching, it is instead something actively woven into the life they are leading. Participation also means that the audience reads itself in the context of the performance event rather than outside of it. The audience involved dance to celebrate the divinity of Dionysus in *Dionysus in 69* happen quite successfully because the audience members are behaving within the confines of the narrative and atmosphere given by the performance event. Hence, it is okay to dance wildly because it is part of *Dionysus in 69*' s narrative; a performance narrative is created in part by the audience members as they write their own narratives of experiencing the piece. In essence, the participatory theater calls on the audience to have immediate

presence to the event so that the exchange between themselves and the performers can occur. Without immediacy, the audience is not within the performance, but still lost to the fragment world.

Peggy Phelan writes in *Unmarked* that “performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation” for the act of performance is disappearing as it is happening, it resists commodification and furthermore it resists storage of any kind save for memory. (148). A media recording of a performance is entirely different from the live experience. The narratives written during participatory theatre further resist the constant digitalization of our personal narratives. When the personal narrative becomes intertwined with the performance, it too is subject to the disappearing performance goes through. When audience members give something to a performance they move away from strictly consuming by sight and sound. Phelan goes on to write that “without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control” (148). Participation further complicates this notion by making the audience’s narrative also outside of the grasp of reproducibility. Audience members at participatory events leave with a unique memory of their own experience that is tempered by their contribution to the performance event. The event they attended could only happen with their consent and then it is gone with no record other than the memory of the experience. At a typical production of a play, five people could say afterwards that they all saw the same actions transpire on stage and they may have different interpretations. Five people at a participatory event, however, have five different experiences of actions that they did in the course of the event’s progression. These events disappear into memory so well it becomes almost impossible to truly write about these events, for each experience is determined by individual choice in the face of participation.

The second way in which contemporary participatory theatre fits into the fragmentation of self is through the lack of relevant theory that takes the phenomenon into account. The previous theories on participatory theatre were conceived before fragmentation had become an issue it is now. Grotowski, Schechner, Brecht, Artaud, and the rest could not see the audience suffering from the conditions associated with our advanced information age. One important aspect of this study is that I to take into account the way in which individuals write their personal experience of performance in consideration of how fragmentation through social media has changed our experience of the everyday. The past theory is still relevant and provides a basis on which I frame discussions of participation; however, the value of participation in the contemporary theatre is that it has the potential to strongly modify the way in which the audience members conceive their personal narratives. That intersection has not seen much exploration and I believe the new value of participation resides within that intersection.

The following four chapters each cover a different performance event. Within the chapter I discuss the techniques the artists used to make participation possible. Each piece uses participation in a different way and I will demonstrate how these differences effect the audience's experience of the event. What links the four events, however, is that they challenge the audience to contribute something and to live in the present moment. The artists take a bold risk in giving authorship of the experience over to the audience. That risk is rewarded for the audiences to these events react in ways that show that theatre and performance can engage people on a level that other arts cannot. These pieces, for an hour or two, give the audience a chance to become a community of collaborators – creating an experience outside the fragmentation of everyday life.

## Chapter II

### Tea and Ancient Afro-Caribbean Songs: The Intersection of Quotidian Participation and Non-Quotidian Performance in *The Living Room*

When Philip Salata begins his song it is somewhat unexpected. The light does not change, no one tells the audience that the performance was going to begin, and no curtain is raised; the dramatic action of *The Living Room* simply starts in the midst of the audience eating, drinking, and chatting. Strangely, it is not a jolting start, yet his song tears a tiny hole in the fabric of the quotidian that, over the course of *The Living Room*, becomes larger; yet, the quotidian is not eradicated through the performance. Instead, The Workcenter carefully creates an exchange between the everyday actions and the “living string of actions based on work with ancient songs of tradition” that comprises the majority of *The Living Room*'s dramatic thrust. Thomas Richards and his collaborators accomplish the exchange by implementing several distinct choices that make up the social events surrounding the dramatic action of *The Living Room*. One significant shift in the development of Richards' work at the Workcenter is that the spectator has moved beyond their definition of their audience as just a witness or one who is outside of the event entirely. They have also become “a guest” who is invited to contribute towards the performance event (Chevelle). The name of the opus itself explicitly states a goal for the performance event: that through the spatial arrangement and the various techniques that engage the audience, the performance event should charge the space with a sense of liveness for all those present.

*The Living Room* is the current opus directed by Thomas Richards and created by the five member Focused Research Team in Art as Vehicle of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards. It has been in constant development and rehearsal since 2008 and has toured the United States, Asia, South America, and much of Europe. The performance proposes questions for the spectators rather than presenting a complete narrative or an analyzable message. The questions brought forth are specific to each individual audience member, but they all stem from a primary query:

“How can one be with another in such a way that the quotidian slides seamlessly into the non-quotidian” (Richards, et al.). Another way I wish to frame the question for this paper is, can a performance event continue the action of the everyday and simultaneously stand out as something extraordinary? Secondly, the piece is an “investigation into how the potentialities of performance craft can both enrich and be enriched by daily inter-personal relations and realities” (Richards, et al.). This other question, which informs the first one, is the direction that the current incarnation of the Workcenter’s Focused Research Team has pursued -- reinvigorating the relationship with their spectators# by asking what they can contribution to the performance. The Workcenter’s new perspective on their relationship to those who witness their work is the primary and focus of my investigation. Their engagement with their guests/witnesses in *The Living Room* works toward bringing their non-quotidian, essentialist performance, into greater congress with the personal narratives of those who attend the event.

### ***The Living Room Within the Context of the Workcenter’ s History***

Thomas Richards has directed *Downstairs Action*, *Action*, *The Letter*, and *The Living Room* under the umbrella of the Focused Research Team in *Art as Vehicle*; and in each opus, as Richards terms them, the work is developed with a different group of artists. The throughline between the opuses is that they are a continuation of the research Jerzy Grotowski pursued in the last phase of his career, *Art as Vehicle*. Among the continued exploration of vibratory songs and ancient texts, Grotowski describes *Art as Vehicle’ s* underpinnings in the creation of work and who it is for: “the seat of the montage,” that is the focus of work or “action” , is not devised as a product for the spectators, but it “is in the doers, the artists who do” (Grotowski 124). The seat of the Grotowski and Richard’ s research is focused on the craft of the doers and not on creating consumable images for spectators. However, *The Living Room* is an event where the focus is slightly shifted where the performance event and the craft of the doers is now shared with the spectators. Like previous opuses, *The Living Room* is highly structured, but the

organizing principle is not a narrative for the guests to understand; instead, there is a dream-like unfolding of sounds and images. During the dramatic action, recognizable images arise such as stories that humanity has been telling and retelling, like one's coming of age through a journey. Along with the songs sourced from Afro and Afro-Caribbean sources are ancient texts translated word for word literally into English; each doer in the piece has his or her text that is performed individually. The songs and text are woven into a repeatable, highly rehearsed score for each doer. Salata writes that "the articulated score is a visible vehicle, which may be able to deliver, through induction, something otherwise imperceptible"; the doers in *The Living Room* use their score to reach that imperceptible and almost unknown quality. What is different is the move away from the monastic isolation of earlier opuses in *Art as Vehicle*; they do their score not only for themselves, but to share that imperceptible quality they create with their guests.

Thomas Richards, Grotowski's essential collaborator since 1986, has directed a number of works involving different team members. Here I want briefly to examine the two previous works developed by the Focused Research Team, *Action* (1994 – 2009) and *The Letter* (2003-2008), as a way of understanding the massive reduction in distance between the witnesses and doers, represented in the attachment of "guest" properties to the spectators in *The Living Room*. This reduction is also apparent in the spatial arrangements. In *Action*, the witnesses are seated on the far end of the performance space in a small rectangle; this was conceived to put them "out of the way" and to make apparent that their presence was not necessary for the unfolding of the event (Wolford 137). *The Letter* contains gestures toward including the witnesses as a component of event. Witnesses were arranged in a semicircle, physically closer to the doers, and Thomas began to make visual contact with the witnesses, thereby performing a "function in the piece as a kind of shuttle between the other performers, who were not having any contacts with the witnesses" (Chevelle). This indicates that the work was moving towards the deep sharing that is so prevalent in *The Living Room*. Audience were very limited in size for both opuses

and the performance space was “laminated with the particular expectations and behavior codes of Workcenter culture...silent attention, alertness, and anticipation” (Wolford 137). *The Living Room* does not do away with these intrinsic elements of the Workcenter culture; instead it finds a new way of mitigating them in light of how the work opens up the space and the event as a whole for the guests’ contribution.

In *Action and The Letter* the dramatic action is the primary thrust of the performance event -- this is highlighted especially in *Action* by the swift, efficient entrance and exit of the doers that mark the beginning and end of the opus. *The Living Room* is distinguished by the composition nature of the performance in which the dramatic action is couched between two distinct social events. The social events work as distinct moments in time and spatial relations with the guests that give the Workcenter the space wherein they explore the intersection of their performance craft with everyday actions. The social events take the form of a casual gathering full of eating, drinking, and conversation or not unlike something that might occur in a person’s living room.

#### **Before the Event: A Request, Economics, and a Warm Space**

The guests for *The Living Room* are offered some preparation for the event in the form of a request. Those invited are asked, usually by email, to bring with them some food or drink to share with others. The Workcenter also shares coffee, tea, and fruit at each presentation. The request for food adds to the quotidian and the non-quotidian qualities of *The Living Room*. It breaks the guests’ expectations before the performance event even begins in that it is a clear indication that *The Living Room* is not an event that is solely for spectator consumption. Two new expectations are created through the request: first, it works against approaching *The Living Room* as a piece of presentational theatre and secondly, it signals that guests have the opportunity to contribute more than their uninvolved presence to the event. The request is not one which produces anxiety in the guests over coerced participation. Bringing food to share is a strange request within the context of a performance

event; however, the request does not indicate that the guests are at risk of becoming a part of the dramatic action -- a set of behaviors and codes that only the doers know. Bringing food to share is a known behavior for many and thereby possible and even comfortable for the guests to achieve. The request takes on dual functionality: first it allows the guests to approach the event from that of the quotidian or known behavior; and second it aids the Workcenter approaching them as their guests rather than distant witnesses. Both functions are essential to the success of the social events.

The guest distinction is further emphasized and strengthened by the Workcenter presenting their work for free. In many theaters, the exchange of money for a ticket or the purchase of the right to experience a show creates an unfortunate hang-up in the way the audience relates to the event. Specifically, it leads to the expectation that the audience is purchasing a service (i.e. the performance or the entertainment) and that they should have nothing exceptional required of them because they have bought their way in versus having been invited by the artists. The Workcenter resists this economic situation by charging no price to attend *The Living Room*: "we don't want the people to come [to *The Living Room*] as consumers" (Chevelle). The request to bring food is not required to enter and therefore is not replacement for the exchanging money-for-seat scheme. Admittance is gained simply by RSVPing to the invitation made by the Workcenter: "people are proposed to come, to see the work, but we present that to them as an invitation; also to share a moment together, and to bring some food as we would do when we invite friends; to spend some time" (Chevelle). The possibility emerges for guests as producers in this situation, in the form of sharing food and their contribution towards the performance event. In the Workcenter's resistance to the economics of attendance the performance event is rendered without dollar value for the guests. There is no question of economic worth to mediate the guests from the event which allows for them to engage at a deeper level that the Workcenter desires.

The arrangement of the space for *The Living Room* varies based on location, but the basic formation of seating and playing space is maintained for the sake of the dramatic action, which is highly

structured, and for the benefit of the guest-doer relationship. At home in Pontedera, Italy the event takes place in a room in the upstairs of the Workcenter building, the same room in which Action was performed. Lisa Wolford, who wrote on Action, states that the room is neither a performance space nor a ritual space; it is “simply a room, a place where people once went about their business in ordinary ways” (Wolford 136). Like Action, the space is still steeped in the expectations surrounding Workcenter culture; however the arrangement of seating for Living Room works to bring forth the ordinary qualities that are also present. This effect is for the benefit of the question of how can the “quotidian slide seamlessly into the non-quotidian” in that by engaging the everyday qualities of the room, the space loses some of the special distance (between what is quotidian) created by the expectations regarding the Workcenter (Richards, et al.) *The Living Room* also strives to keep the room a place in which people do various everyday things and rejects the notion that the space fully becomes something in which only the non-quotidian can exist; this is for the second question of interpersonal relations. By maintaining a sense of the ordinary in the space, the daily or quotidian acts during the social events can still occur and also stand beside the non-quotidian actions that make up the dramatic action, thereby making the performance more effective at teasing out the phenomenon the Workcenter is exploring.

*The Living Room* has toured to various countries and it is adaptable in both the spatial arrangement and the previously discussed effects of space to other rooms. The Workcenter requests a room that has similar properties of someone’s living room: open space for seating, windows, walls that are either wallpapered or covered with wood -- ideally, not in a theater. A black-box space or any typical theater would not suffice to the needs of the work and would certainly detract from what the Workcenter is trying to accomplish as theater spaces are laden with expectations that signal to the audience it is a place where the quotidian is left at the door. When *The Living Room* was presented at Trinity University, the team asked us for a room other than our black-box theater. What we ended up using was the Faculty Gold Room. The Gold Room is a special room that only the faculty has regular

access to. The furniture is comfortable, the lightening is pleasant, and there is always coffee available. Thomas Richards selected the room because it is normally used as a place of meeting and conversation; and it is also endowed with qualities of warmth, comfort, and friendliness. In the black-box, the space would have acted negatively on their work -- the warm space we found provided a fertile basis for putting an audience at ease in order to form a connection with them. They also request that the seating is comfortable and made up of furniture that is found in the home; opting for an electric combination of sofa chairs, dining chairs, stools, and the like while eschewing uniform seating. The seating is arranged single row style; if there are not enough chairs, floor pillows are placed in front. About half-way in the rectangular playing space is a couch, perpendicular to the wide side of the rectangle, with a coffee table in front of it. The couch is also seating for two or three guests. On one end of the space there is a bar at which food and drink is prepared. Floor and table lamps are set up throughout to fully light the entire space and to bring out the warmth and glow of the room. The universal lighting also contributes to putting the performance event outside of the bounds of normal theatre and pushing more towards an event in which everyone present is included.

#### **The Performance: Two Social Events Surrounding the Dramatic Event**

With the space properly arranged and the guests prepared for their role by the food request *The Living Room* can begin. When a guest arrives outside of the space they are greeted by a Workcenter member, usually Benoit Chevelle, who checks them off a guest list and directs them toward the room by telling them they can seat in any available place and to set any brought food out on a table for sharing. The performance event begins for each individual as they enter the well-lit, warm space. Once seated, they are approached by either Philip Salata, Teresa Salas, or Jessica Losilla Hebrail who offer to serve coffee, tea or water. During this period the guests are free to traverse all parts of the space, acquire the food brought by other people, and to talk to one another or the Workcenter team whom are present from the moment the guests enter. This is what essentially constitutes the first social event of *The Living*

*Room*, as intended by the Workcenter. Schechner defines social events as interruptions to the dramatic action as “points at which the play stop[s] being a play and [becomes] a social event” (Schechner 44). *The Living Room* utilizes social events as bookends to the dramatic action to create a before and after state for the audience; it is also because the nature of The Workcenter’s work does not provide for interruptions to their score. The Workcenter team is also intentional in that they are hosts of the social event and the audience is their guests that they are sharing sustenance in food, drink, and their performance. The opening social event is simply people – both audience and Workcenter team – behaving under the given conditions of a casual gathering in someone’s living space within the context of a performance event yet, without the artifice the dramatic event requires. The intention on the part of the Workcenter, the devices they set up through space, and casual audience interaction ensure that the time preceding the dramatic action is not merely the typical filing in and sitting as experienced in most theatrical events. It is a time in which people grow accustomed and comfortable with the space and those within it.

The dramatic action is started when Philip begins his first song. His voice, which is at first soft but then rises to strong and full, cuts through the social event by indicating that something new has begun. The dramatic action replacing the social event does not force the quotidian out of the present moment nor do the doers retreat to a place distant from the audience which surrounds them. The physical properties of the room – its normalness, its warmth, its abundance of light – still remain and the endowments to the room – that it is a place in which the everyday can also exist -- created by the social event, still linger in the form of half eaten food and partially drunk tea. The doers move in and out through where the audience is sitting and they are not afraid to make eye contact with guests that are coupled with warm smiles. The dramatic action, akin to that in previous opuses, unfolds like a dream with articulated and recognizable images present in the fleeting moments that rise out of the physical score and the vibratory songs. There is little purpose of detailing the course of action here as the

experience and the interpretation is highly subjective and elusive. What is clear is the ending of the ninety minutes of dramatic action, which flows out into another social event just as Philip's singing eased the first social event out. At the conclusion of the final song, Thomas Richards is kneeling in front of the coffee table, a kitchen knife in his hand, while the guests sit in silence. On the table is a birthday cake which was brought out during an earlier song. He eases the knife in the cake, creating small slices. As the audience quietly watches Thomas, unsure if the dramatic action is concluded, a strange sensation fills the room – the intermixing of the quotidian and the non-quotidian is nearly palpable in those moments. The immediate effect of the dramatic action is that it can cause the audience to slow down and find solace in the present moment. The moment hangs in the room until Philip is heard pouring a cup of tea at the bar; the pour is not a careless gesture, but one that is delicately performed. The teapot is held high above the cup, creating a long stream of tea that produces the distinct sound of pouring loud enough for the entire room to hear. This final action, while deliberately rehearsed and performed, moves the room from the lasting moment to the social event.

After Philip pours the cup, there is still silence in the room – guests rarely applaud and instead opt to sit reflectively. People are slow to come out of the dramatic event and it is the Workcenter Team walking around and asking their guests if they would enjoy more tea or coffee and if they would like a piece of fruit. Thomas finishes cutting the cake and offers pieces to the guests. What occurs next is up to the choice of each individual. Some elect to leave the room; others talk quietly amongst themselves about what has just taken place; and several people always talk to the Workcenter Team who make themselves open to conversation. While the room has returned to the quotidian practice of the casual gathering, it is within with the lingering presence of the dramatic action.

### **Participation Towards Connecting The Audience With the Performance Craft**

The type of participation *The Living Room* utilizes is that which has no bearing on the outcome of the dramatic action; however, the participation is immensely important to the end effect the

performance even can have. Due to the nature of the Workcenter's performance research, a witness-guest cannot interact with the dramatic action without it causing disruption to the doers' scores. However, team member Benoit Chevelle states that in developing *Living Room*, "the wish was to experiment doing the work in a closer way with the people". This is accomplished by reducing the physical distance as well as expanding the performance event to include social events which are affected by the dramatic action. While the actions asked of the audience – to bring food, to speak to one another and the doers during the social event, to respond to the end of dramatic action by making a choice – are not particularly egregious, they are huge actions in context of the Workcenter's previous work. What is exploited in the social events are the tropes and behaviors surrounding a dinner party or casual gathering.

It is within the social event that the guests can see themselves after experiencing the dramatic action; for ideally after a performance by the Workcenter, the audience should feel something old and very deep stirred up inside of them. But what is it exactly that is brought about through the performance craft and how does it reflect upon the interactions in the concluding social event? It is clear that in the work of Richards, the spectators, as guest-witness, has been embraced once again in form of sharing their unmediated self or the self that is freed from the elements of contemporary life that prevent people from achieving vulnerability together. Kris Salata, in writing about pre-*Living Room* performance events, states that a "significant portion of Grotowski's and Richards's research (and indeed expertise) involves creating the necessary conditions for the doers to abandon their social armor" and through those conditions the doers can reach a state of being in which their unmediated selves are in conference with one another (118). The throughline of the Grotowski-Richards research extends to *The Living Room*, however the marked difference is in that the doers are sharing their unmediated relations with the guests. Guests are not witnessing the performance craft through a window, for there is a particular kind of contact the doers make with them during the dramatic action

and after. In the social event that follows the dramatic action, the guests are invited to interact within the presence of the unmediated relations presented through the doers' craft. Richard writes that their "work on physical actions in only the door for entering into the living stream of impulses" and what is presented for the guests is their mastery of the score of impulses (Richards 104). Because the guests cannot practice the physical work themselves, they are invited to witness how the doers' dedication and practice on their physical work brings forth a presence stripped of social masks. In witnessing such a phenomenon, achieved through the performance craft, the witness have the opportunity to perceive the possibility of a deeper level of connection between people; it is a only a glint, but the final social event gives space for the guests to take the experience of the dramatic action and transform it into personal action. The social event is thus a forum in which the effect of the performers' craft, a less mediated-self, is practiced by the audience. The social event which began *The Living Room* works as a marker for the guests to perceive how they have been changed over the course of the dramatic action.

The artists are present to discuss their work, but it is not a talkback which comes with a certain structure of division between those who have created and those have watched. The guests are not obliged to discuss the performance at all with the doers. The event ends as at an individual choice. When each person chooses to leave the room they cease the experience that has been crafted, in part, and intended by the artists. It is this choice of when the event ends, and also when it begins, that makes *The Living Room* exist more naturally as a part of an individual's narrative#. *The Living Room* allows an audience to experience for two hours what it is like to have performance as an everyday aspect alongside familiar life practices: the doers have lives that are intertwined with performance. Their work is in the rehearsal time as well as the time they spend together cooking, eating, drinking, talking and the like. The social event has every person at the same place – simply living in the aftermath of the dramatic action that has taken place.

In the approach to the dramatic action the Workcenter team do not emphasize the importance of the event at hand, instead they treat the guests with a warmth and sincerity that is unlike the mysterious and serious tones that resonates strongly with past opuses. The openness is all towards discovering what is the purpose of each individual to the event. The choice of a party mirrors that of the dramatic action; within a party there are ebb and flows in the conversation, the energy, and the overall mood. Like a party, one experiences the ebb and flows in the drama – the occasional story rising out of the song and then falling for another narrative to take its place. The willingness to participate determines how audience will act during the last social event; without the careful planning of the involvement techniques, the audience would submit to the trained behaviors of clapping and exiting. Instead, the Workcenter is successful in creating an environment in which the audience is not only willing to interacting with others, but also comfortable with sitting and reflecting in front of others. The Workcenter aims for the present moment by using their non-quotidian performance to bring the audience to the present during the social event. This present moment is a rare occurrence in our digitally saturated world.

The legacy of Jerzy Grotowski exists through Thomas Richards not only in the continuation of Art as Vehicle, but also in the dedication to conducting research as constant, diligent practice. Richards, in pursuing his after Grotowski performance craft, has found different approaches to the relation of the work to the audience. What began as opening up a few seats to witnesses has now expanded to an event that focuses on the intersection between performance craft and everyday practice. For those who were able to witness Action or The Letter the event was “perceptible as a resonance in the spectator,” but after the event one could presume that resonance as a result of an extraordinary quasi-religious/ritual event (Salata 122). The Workcenter, in engaging methods of interaction, has found ways in *The Living Room* to make the resonance not strange, but a possible part of our everyday interactions.

*The Living Room* at its core is about sharing -- sharing food, traditions, performance, and an unmasked level of connection between people.

### Chapter III

#### Dancing With Doubteness in *Dionysus in 69* in 09

“A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it” – Antonin Artaud, *The Theater of Cruelty* (First Manifesto)

“To say I am not a god would be the same as saying this is not a theater” – Finely as *Dionysus, Dionysus in 69*

The weather rarely turns chilly in Austin, Texas, but on a particular night in December 2009 the air outside was frigid which made the heat generated by the 150 spectators, closely huddled together on carpeted floors and wooden platforms, all the more necessary. Maybe something about the cold made it easier for us in the audience to dance with Dionysus and his Bacchantes in order to celebrate his divinity. Then later, many in the audience were comfortable in following an almost seductive, yet caring Bacchant into the total caress – a tangle of intertwining limbs touching bodies unseen that stood in for the orgies Pentheus sees before he is torn apart by his own mother. That December<sup>2</sup> I was fortunate enough to not just see, but experience the Rude Mechanical’s recreation of the seminal work of Environmental Theater devised by The Performance Group and Richard Schechner: *Dionysus in 69*, which the Rude’s retitled as *Dionysus in 69* in 09’ . The original performance, devised from Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, is hallmark of American avant-garde and a demonstration of the levels participatory theatre can achieve. The 2009 recreation reinvigorates the old questions purposed by the original, but it also conjures new ones relating to the act of recreation. The Rudes neither merely stage their own version, nor did they strive to produce a 100% accurate museum piece. Their recreation also shows

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<sup>2</sup> And in October 2012, I was invited to attend a pre-tour rehearsal.

how the techniques of audience participation created by The Performance Group are still powerful 40 years later.

### **What Does It Mean To Reconstruct a Performance Event?**

*Dionysus in 69 in 09*' is not like colonial Williamsburg. The production or reconstruction was not living museum of the late 1960s that the 2009 audience could peer into; what the Rude's produced was a performance event that stretched between 1969 and 2009 and asked the contemporary audience to give as much as the one from the late 60s. The Rude Mechanicals, despite having the full text of the play, did not rehearsal process as one would for a typical theatre production. The reconstruction is based on the original performance, rather than text based; however, it is neither a one-for-one remake of the original piece nor is it devoid of personal interpretations or additions. Directors Shawn Sides and Madge Darlington made the decision to remount their Dionysus production "as closely as possible to the originals, recreating as best we could, the original circumstances, rehearsal processes, and performance context and vocabulary" (Sides 2). This was done in order to recreate the atmosphere in which a piece like Dionysus had thrived so well which resulted in strong reactions from audiences; the second benefit was that it was the fuel to their own discoveries that added personal touches to the reconstruction production. Their reconstruction is not a quotation of the original and it was not staged totally like a film with a focus on achieving total accuracy. The reconstruction exists somewhere between original work and totally faithful restaging. The Rude's recreation is another layer that sits upon the original which itself rests upon the ancient play of Euripides, *The Bacchae*.

After restaging *Dionysus in 69*, the company tackled Malbou Mines' seminal work, *The B. Beaver Animation*. That performance combined poetic text and dance like movement; that was also accompanied by complex and well-timed stage elements such a falling and rising platforms that worked

with the careful movement of the performers. *Dionysus*, both in the original and the recreation, require well timed and rehearsed feats, but the performance event is distinctly marked by an energy of unknown possibilities which comes from the closeness of the audience to action. The play's environmental staging results in significant portions of the action taking place throughout the areas the audience sits. The essence of *Dionysus* is, in part, from the achievement of Schechner's theories on environmental theater. Environmental theater is, in short, staging in which all of the space is shared between the audience and performers. This sharing of space gives way to the possibility of participation and in the case of *Dionysus in 69* the performance "invites the audience in a lightly controlled way" (Sides Interview). The audience is allowed to participate as much as they like throughout the event, both in great and small ways. The result of the shared space is that collaboration between performers and spectators is required. The performers must traverse the space in which the audience sits in order to continue their rehearsed actions and must accommodate for whomever they encounter. The audience must also make way for the performers to enact their actions. This little of bit initial collaboration opens up the possibilities for more intense interplay between the performers and audience that occurs later in *Dionysus*.

While *Dionysus* was not the first devised piece of theatre created and performed, it stands as one of the best documented. There is the Brian De Palma's film, Schechner's books on *Dionysus* and *Environmental Theater*, a complete script, and Bill Shepard's detail account of The Performance Group's successes and struggles with the original process. Knowing how *Dionysus* came out of intense physical and psychological work, the Rudes found it necessary to emulate similar experiences in their collective in order to better capture the thought process, drive, and spirit behind the original production. One particular exercise practiced was the total caress – from this exercise comes the caress that involves in the audience which occurs in the latter portion of the performance. Sides and Darlington picked an actor who then had to choose a fellow actor. The selection process made the exercise immediately

“emotionally precarious” says Sides (2). The two performers went to a secluded space and began to explore each other physically. All the performers were paired up similarly, and then sent off to their respective areas. After sometime, the pairs formed larger and larger groups creating a total caress of the cast exploring each other’s bodies – an act that was “more sensual than passionate” or more about the experience of the tactile sensation rather than a group sexual encounter (Sides 2). While the Rude Mechanicals do not practice the same sort of exercises that are meant to strip a performer down to his or herself bare self, Shawn Sides notes that the exercises were about giving over to the performance and building a cohesive group of performers who could undertake the challenges of Dionysus. She followed up the statement on the exercises by mentioning that even 40 years later “Richard Schechner knows how to turn people into an ensemble” (Sides Interview).

#### **Layers: Performer - Performer 1969 - Euripides’ Character**

One result of The Performance Group devising Dionysus from intense psychological and physical exercises is that the actors play themselves playing the characters. The performers switched between acting a character from Euripides and their own character, identified by their actual names, they had developed from the group process. The layering is utilized in moments at which the play toys with the concept of fixed and stable identity. The following dialog is an encounter between Dionysus/William Finley and Pentheus/Bill Shephard in which the god Dionysus is able to freely move between his identities, whereas the stiff and angry Pentheus can only see and perform the role given by Euripides.

Dionysus: ...You don’t know who you are

Pentheus: I am Pentheus. Son of Echion and Agave. And King of Thebes.

Dionysus to Shephard: Pentheus? Son of Echnion and Agave and King of Thebes? Bullshit. You're Bill Shephard. You're in the Group. You're no god, but you are in the Group. Pentheus? Echnion? You're coo-coo. Take him away. (Performance Group, np)

The Rude's add on their own layer in the actor-character dynamic: the 2009 actors play themselves, playing their 1969 counterpart, who is playing a character from *The Bacchae*. The new layering dynamic of the 2009 performers indicates a certain ownership of their production while still conjuring up the atmosphere of and paying constant tribute to the original. It also brings up the question of time: what time does *Dionysus in 69 in 09* occur in? The original is explicitly a product of the late 1960s, and the reconstruction refrains from updating it totally to the contemporary times. Therefore, what is presented is not clearly fixed in 1969 or 2009.

The Rudes subtly request that their audience also take on a role. The role is of the 1969 audience experiencing the play in New York City. The program for *Dionysus* contains a timeline of important social, cultural, and political events leading up to the 1969 run of the play. The timeline is a guide to what thoughts and concerns could have been in the minds of the theatre-goers in 1969 so that the audience members have some material to work with in the construction of their role. It also serves to contextualize the play, which is very much shaped by the socio-political climate of the time -- namely the 1968 presidential election and the subsequent accession of Richard Nixon to that office. Why ask the audience to transport themselves to 1969? It is about readying the audience to participate in the production; Sides says that "to a certain degree asked them, and maybe even explicitly asked them to pretend they were from the 60s; to play with us" (Sides Interview). Giving the options to become someone else, to put on the mask of a theater-goer in 1969 New York City, puts the audience on a similar level as the performers in that each person is both themselves as well as someone from the past.

Each identity exists at the same time, but rises to the forefront at different moments. These moments are scripted for the actors such as the example above, but for the audience it is far less articulated.

The play asks the audience to engage in acts that are quite outside of the quotidian. They are actions that are especially risky because many strangers – fellow audience members – are watching. The possibility of accessing an assumed identity aids audience members in committing to participation, “because [Dionysus] is from the past” states Shawn Sides, which therefore “gives permission to set your [the audience’s] everyday self aside and just go for it” (Sides Interview). What some audience members realize is that the performance space is marked different from regular life in such a way that it becomes a place in which actions that are not part of the quotidian become possible. This is akin to the relationship an actor has to the stage – a space in which all aspects of life are possible to enact. The casting of the audience members provides them with the freedom to access the possibilities the performance opens up in the participatory moments. For each audience member, there is the chance to seize upon the moments at which they can act through the identity provided by the Rudes – an identity that might have the desire to go and dance in the celebration of Dionysus. During the moments at which Dionysus “breaks down” and becomes “a social event” the normative terms of audience, spectator, actor, and performer lose meaning (Schechner 44). Instead, each person has to look upon everyone else and redefine who each person is in context of the social event. No longer is the audience comprised of people at the Off Center to see play. Individuals who participate and engage themselves in the social events move the performance forward while also, temporarily, becoming someone else. The identity they came in with is not lost, but it is modified by the gestures, actions, and emotional energy from 1969.

Dionysus utilizes the two forms of participation. Most sections of participation do not determine the outcome and continuation of the dramatic action. In the event of no audience involvement, the

chorus could still perform the ecstasy dance and the caress to the degree necessary for the dramatic action to continue. When Dionysus suggests that Pentheus could not get any woman in the performance space on his own the outcome of the dramatic action hinges on the decision of one woman in the audience. Pentheus seeks out and chooses a woman and then tries to seduce her. The result is always the same; rejection and shame for Pentheus which results in the dramatic action and the conflict moving forward. There has been one incident<sup>3</sup>, however, where the outcome of the seduction changed: a woman in 1969 'saved' Bill Shephard from having to perform the rest of the play (Shepherd). This one moment that the dramatic action of the play hangs on does not appear as though it was created with the thought that the selected woman could change the outcome. While the result is of Pentheus' desperate seduction is nearly certainly known and expected, there is still the lingering possibility of audience intervention into how the dramatic action will proceed.

It is important to note that even though the Pentheus seduction sequence is set up to end in failure, at the expense of Pentheus/Bill Shepherd, it is extremely exploitive of a single female audience member. Schechner deliberately placed the entire progress of the dramatic action on one person who is forced to make a choice in front of her fellow audience members. It is at this moment of participation where it becomes more like the aggressive style found in *Paradise Now* or even comedy shows that seek to humiliate one member of the audience for the sake of the others – a sacrificial lamb of sorts. Pentheus slowly selects and tries to seduce one female audience member in such a fashion that it thrusts everyone else back into the role of purely spectators. This is because one of their own has been made separate and even abused by the performance; they are laid open to the danger of not knowing as much as the performers do. The selected woman and the performers are on entirely unequal ground and everyone in the audience can see it while reaping the voyeuristic pleasure of such a sexually charged moment. "Participation is a way of trying to humanize relationships between

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<sup>3</sup> The seduction moment has worked with the same outcome in all the performances of the reconstruction.

performers and spectators” write Schechner, and yet in this moment the entirety of the open relationship between the actors and audience is placed at stake. The choice is not invalid in it of itself; it even makes for a thrilling piece of theatrical tension. The presence of an audience member who has an important choice makes the stakes of the dramatic action even higher; but it is exploitive of participatory techniques. It has the possibility of destroying the enriching and liberating participatory experience found in all-inclusive and equalizing moments of Dionysus.

During the social events there is a temporary suspension of certain elements of the identity held by performers and spectators – namely the distinction of who is watched and who is watching. The distinction still remains for those spectators who make the decision to not participate. Those who do engage in participation have the opportunity to liberate themselves of the status of watcher/observer/spectator. They get to contribute significantly to the overall experience of the event. Simply, if more people get up and dance then that performance of Dionysus is marked by a more collaborative quality in regards to how the experience of the event is created. The ceding of total control of writing to that of shared or collaborative writing of the experience of each performance creates a different sort of requirement for the performers. It therefore behooves the performers to invite the audience in such ways that increase participation.

### **Liminality between 1969 and 2009**

The space created by the Rudes for their reconstruction gives the audience the option to place themselves between the two times of the original and the reconstruction. This is because the space is stretched between 1968/9 New York City and 2009 Austin, Texas – it is in no place, yet it is a very distinct place in which the reconstruction can flourish. The space for the reconstruction exists as a liminal one that the audience can sense. The audience members sense it because while being subtly asked to place themselves in 1968, such as through the use of the timeline in the program, they are

certainly their 2009 selves throughout. Their duality is simply a reflection layers practiced by the performers – 2009 self, 1969 counterpart, character. Of course, the audience members does not engage their character or 1968 self like the rehearsed performer. However, because the Rude's distinctly encourage the audience members to take on another identity, even in a limited fashion, it becomes a key feature to the success participatory social events that take place in the reconstructed Dionysus.

Why does the liminality aid in the success of the performance event? The unfixed place between 68' and 09' is still a distinctive space in which the reconstruction of Dionysus occurs. There is stability in the physical properties of the room in that it is a large room within the Off Center<sup>4</sup>. The large wooden structure and white washed walls bear no echoes to a time – the only exception is if someone has an intimate familiarity of the original Dionysus. However, the audience members know that the performance they are attending is a reconstruction. Very early on in the performance it is made apparent that the Rudes are not engaging in a full quotation of the original, but have injected playful moments that point toward the liminality of the whole event.

Hannah as Tiresias: Did the god say that just the young should dance? Or just the old? Or just the whites? Or Just the Blacks? Or Just the Italians? Or Just the Greeks? Or Just James Brown? No, he wants his honor from all mankind. He wants no one excluded from his worship. Not even The Rude Mechanicals (pause) The Performance Group (audience laughter). (Rude Mechanicals DVD)

There is also the physical in relation to the people present – proximity of the audience to each other, the closeness of the performers, and the two social events that are quite physically involved. The physical is real and present and undeniable, but the concept of one keeping their 2009 identity intact throughout the reconstruction is certainly doubtful. The dropping of the 2009 identity does not mean one will

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<sup>4</sup> Specially, it is the Center Center. The Off Center is the large warehouse owned by the Rude Mechanicals.

assume a 1968 persona; though the performers view the audience as both 1968/2009 persons regardless of an individual's actions. The constructs of the place not only allows, but also eases willing audience members towards adopting a temporary identity which accepts participating in actions that their everyday 2009 identity would deem totally abnormal – i.e. the dancing and the caress.

If the event is, during the present moment at which it is enacted, between the two times then it is ahistorical. That is to say it actively refuses our desire to pin it down to a particular moments within our personal historical narrative. For example, after a typical production of Hamlet, one could say, 'I saw Hamlet. And first a ghost appeared, then Hamlet talked with the ghost, then he staged a play, then he killed Polonius, then he was banished, then he came back, then he fought Laretes, then he killed Claudius, then he died, and then Fortinbras spoke the last line of the play.' Most plays reflect the linear historical narrative we are used to<sup>5</sup> in describing events that transpired without our direct presence or influence. Yes, a person may interject how they felt in reaction to a particular moment; but a reaction does not mean a person had input into shaping the moment they experienced along with others. Dionysus has similar unfolding of events that are interrupted by the social participatory events. One then says when recounting Dionysus: 'I walked in alone, I found a seat, I watched the birthing of Penthesus and followed by Dionsyus, but then I got up and danced.' That getting up to dance is the moment at which the play temporarily breaks down for that audience member and becomes something else requiring a different way he or she writes their personal history of the performance event.

### **Social Events and Doubleness**

The two points of participation that stand out in Dionysus are the ecstasy dance and the total caress, both of which Schechner considers as social events or moments at which "the play stopped being a play" and the audience "felt that they were free to enter the performance as equals" (44). When the

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<sup>5</sup> Even non-linear plays are subjected to certain order of event unfolding as the dramatic action progresses.

play stops the dramatic is put on hold, but the performance event continues. Both social events can only happen within the context of *Dionysus in 69* as a performance event, in that the dramatic action feed directly into the participatory events and vice-versa. The effect the participation has on the dramatic events varies and is not set or strongly controlled; rather, the piece is structured in such a way that the possibility of influence the unfolding of the experience of the performance event is apparent to the audience.

It is in the two social events that we see the doubleness in the role of the audience caused by participatory elements come out. The doubleness is much more pronounced in *Dionysus* than in the other pieces discussed here because of some differences. The space, while fully environmental, has some key distinctions. The middle area surrounded by the wooden towers is where much of the dramatic action occurs, but it sometimes it opens up for the moments of participation.



The space arrangement, particularly the fact that some of the audience is seated on high towers far above most of the action of the play, leads to some members not having the opportunity to participate.

This regulates some people to primarily an observational role. The social events themselves are by consent only; a person can easily choose to watch others participate, however, what they are watching is not the play/dramatic action unfolding. They are watching the active collaboration between all those involved in the social events. Finally, the social events occur in the midst of the dramatic action whereas in *The Living Room* the social events bookended the dramatic action. These distinctions in create situations in which the audience moves more fluidly between the role of participant and observer.

According to Shawn Sides, it is clear in the performance when the social events end and the dramatic action continues: “people understand, now we are going to get on with the play” (Sides Interview). It is written into the actions of the play when and how the social events conclude. For example, the ecstasy dance continues as long as the energy is maintained and only ends once the actor playing Penthesus decides that the energy no longer sustains fruitful collaboration. He causes the social event to move back into the dramatic action by silencing the other performers who are dancing and providing the instrumental music. Gradually the music stops along with the dancing and the audience soon realizes that the ecstasy dance sequence is over. Does this make the social events not an organic exchange? No it does not. While the beginning and ending are controlled by the performers and rehearsed, what goes on during the social event is a certainly collaboration between the audience and the performers. The separate groups come together to make something different with a rhythm that is unique and not like the rest of the performance event. Furthermore, each instance of performing Dionysus contains a different creation of the experience dancing social event. We can think of dramatic time as a straight line, and participation time as a spiral that neither moves forward nor backwards, but moves constantly in on itself until it feeds back out into the dramatic time.

The original production of *Dionysus in 69* is incredible interesting in its own right as a piece of experimental theatre. The degree to which it has been studied, written about, and cited is a testament

to its lasting influence. The participatory elements The Performance Group integrated into their show are not only notable for the responses they elicited, but how they were necessary parts of the performance and not ornamental additions. The Rude's decision to remount the work brings forth interesting questions. The primary function of the remount, as Shawn Sides has said, was to educate their audience on an important influence the work has had on her and the Rudes: Sides studied under Schechner, many of the Rudes had studied Dionysus, and Schechner's scholarship is widely read by theatre students. The working style of the Rude's come out a tradition of collaboration and collectivization that they share with The Performance Group. Their contemporary remounts of Dionysus come at a time when more theatre companies are experimenting with participatory elements. Punchdrunk, for example, has become one of more well-known groups offering pieces that straddle the line between performance and pure experiences. Their examination of the role of the spectator is in a line of practical research that included Dionysus as a major milestone. Remounting Dionysus was not simply repeating the words and movements from 1969. It was also invoking the theories of participation that Schechner developed in creation of the performance with the Group. In my interview, Sides remembered in rehearsal that she thought that the participatory moments would not work. She was immensely surprised when they proved to work far better than she ever could have anticipated. What remounting Dionysus demonstrates is that not only the theories of participation developed in the late 60s still hold significance, but also the impulse to participate is alive in contemporary audiences. From this we can take ease in knowing that audiences want to contribute and want to throw themselves into something extraordinary that is outside of the quotidian. What are required are the right tools to invite the audience to do such things. *Dionysus in 69* and *Dionysus in 69* in 09 provide the inspiration for artists to investigate the techniques and methods to engage the audience on that intimate level.

## Chapter IV

### Traversing the Imitation of 2012 in 2062: TG Space' s *The Cloud*

“We know from old research that Adrai and van Loo were theatre makers who lived their lives on the margin between reality and fiction” - Petra Adrai as Petra Adrai Impersonator, *The Cloud*

“To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other” - Michel de Certeau, *Walking in the City*

“Where did you get that outfit?” asks Petra Adrai to an audience member who has just found her seat in a black-box theater. The woman, who is wearing contemporary clothes hesitates for a split second before answering, “in a second hand shop” to which Petra exclaims, “Wow! It is so retro.” She then looks at among the sitting audience, smiles, and says to everyone, “I am so happy that all of you came dressed in clothes people wore in 2012” (Cloud Video). In that small exchange Petra Adrai, co-director of TheatreGroup Space, has established the essential mechanism of *The Cloud*; specifically, the audience now knows it is a part of the performance and that the performers have cast them as someone else -- a person in 2062 visiting The Museum of 2012.

*The Cloud* does more than invite the audience to contribute to the performance event. It simultaneously investigates the nature of the city and how people traverse it. The performance also calls into question the behavior of contemporary city dwellers by giving the audience a distance from which a familiar world appears strange . The strangeness allows the spectators to therefore examine the cityscape under a different context. TG Space is effective in their pursuits because of a strong focus on

the dialog they aim to engage in with their audiences and their careful attention to the usage of space both in and outside of the theater. They also are able to create the distance between the audience members and their city by manipulating the experience of time. The foremost TG Space accomplish this is by asking their audience to play along with them and believe, more or less, that they are all from the year 2062.



The action of *The Cloud* is broken up into three parts. The first is staged in a black box theater with the audience arranged in typical presentation seating. The second occurs as a walking tour of the city. Finally, the third section returns to the black box and the audience occupies the stage alongside the performers. The three sections are distinct in that they also are markers of what year in which the performers, TG Space's Luc Van Loo and Petra Adrai, have indicated that everyone is in. In the first segment, TG Space eases the audience into the idea that they are from 2062; the second segment takes place in a museum of 2012 in 2062; finally, the third section is an easing out of 2062 back into 2012.

The first segment takes place within a black box space with the audience seated in a stadium-seating configuration and lasts for around 30 minutes. The first section begins with the audience

members taking their seats as they would in a typical theater event. When the audience members begin to file into the space, the performers, especially Petra Adrai, begin interacting with them in a friendly manner. In the segment Petra, Loo, and Li Yang – the Standard Mandarin – prepare the audience for its tour of 2012 Budapest by presenting archeological evidence of how the average home might have appeared and what various apparatus it contained – e.g. a television, a sink, a tall box that might have been a shower or telephone box. They also present the dramatic story of *The Cloud*: the events leading up to the day on which 2012 Petra and van Loo initiated the process that led to the avoidance of “the catastrophe”. The avoidance of the catastrophe also leads to the creation of “The Cloud,” which is a neural network that all people, in the year 2062, are connected to (*The Cloud*). In essence, this segment is totally dedicated towards starting the process of “creating the context in which hard questions can be explored easily” (Adrai Interview). The context TG Space creates in *The Cloud* is that the city outside of the theater building has transformed into a theatrical recreation of the city in 2012. This is done so that the audience members may have the opportunity to approach the city from a different perspective. The everyday and usual sights and sounds of the city become marked by context TG Space provides and the audience members’ eyes see all of it at a sort of distance. The questions TG Space strive to highlight for their audience questions that are hidden in the everyday hustle of living life. The distance, created by TG Space’s context, facilitates moments at which the audience members may find different ways to question the quotidian.

The middle segment, about 45 minutes, involves what one might call a walkabout tour of the city that is presented as a museum – a recreation of 2012 Budapest filled with actors, called “animators”, who have carefully studied the behaviors and habits of those who existed in 2012 (*The Cloud*). I use the term walkabout with a certain specificity related to the Australian Aboriginal practice. The ritual practice of a walkabout is a right of passage act, wherein an Aboriginal would traverse the land for months at a time. In a similar fashion, Petra and Loo treat the tour of 2012 as a semi-dangerous

experience for the person in 2062 and they comment on the bravery of the audience for undertaking such a journey into the past. In the modern history of Australia, white employers would use the term to negatively describe incidents where Aboriginals would cease working for periods of time so that they may return to their traditional life. In regards to *The Cloud*, I use walkabout as a way of pointing to the experience TG Space is offering to their audience. Their tour of the city is an opportunity for an audience member to traverse their land – the streets of Budapest – within a different set of contexts, just as Aboriginals would abandon their modern work to re-engage with their land. The way TG Space flips this notion is that they are not taking the 2012 audience member on such a Walkabout, but the 2062 person and letting them experience the old traditions of the world. While the person is still distinctly their 2012 selves while playing a 2062, the walkabout is the opportunity to spend 30 to 40 minutes looking at their everyday environment as something that is the old traditions or practices no longer in use. This is quite important for TG Space for they desire to give the proper context in which the audience can look at life with new eyes, but old thoughts.

The audience dons wireless headphones that connect to a pre-recorded track of the digital voice of The Cloud speaking. The headphones also link up to live commentary from Luc van Loo and Petra. The half hour tour traces the places Petra and van Loo visited in their search for a Chinese woman that could help them convince the people and government of China to aid in the quest to avoid the “catastrophe”. At various intervals, Petra approaches individuals also on the street and conducts interviews with them about what it is like to live in 2012 and what feelings they have about it; she approaches them saying she is doing research on behalf of the “Research Institute for Empathical History” (*The Cloud*).

The final segment involves the audience returning to the black box space to stand and sit amongst the set onstage. Wine and strange Chinese candies are served and then Petra introduces the watermelon ceremony. As the audience members stand in a circle along with the performers, a

watermelon is passed about and each person is asked to symbolically place a thought about the future into the melon. Once everyone has had his or her chance with the melon it is placed in a frame metal pedestal and the performance ends. Audience members are invited to stay, eat, drink, and talk with the performers and each other. Thus, the last section is an easing out of the performance, rather than a swift and certain end; this segment can last for as long as an audience member remains in the space, akin to the last parts of *The Living Room*. *The Cloud* flows out of the theater at the end and possibly into the lives of the audience.

*The Cloud* is a fantastic example of a piece in which participation is necessary for the dramatic action to move forward. The second half of *Cloud* takes place on the streets of the city with Petra and Luc Van Loo leading the audience members, but they do not lead them in strict fashion. Rather, they provide a route to follow and commentary on things that appear. The commentary continuously reminds the audience that what it is looking at is staged. Every individual experiencing *The Cloud* has self-determination in terms of what they will look at during the walking tour. Petra and Loo simply provide a set of things to look at and think about on the walk as well as a story to go along with it, but the individual is the end arbiter of their experience. Without the audience deciding to follow Petra and Loo outside of the theater and into the city, the dramatic action would cease. TG Space is asking their audience members to take on a particular kind of risk: leaving the safety of the theater to join in the experiment conducted outside.

Of course *The Cloud* is not the first piece of performance that operates in public spaces, however it does contain the unique characteristic that the outside portions are bookended by two segments that take place inside a theater. This bookending effect sets apart the alternate reality TG Space is attempting to turn the city into. Petra Adrai says that creating alternate realities or spaces is important towards having the audience explore questions with TG Space; creating the proper “context

” in which difficult questions are easy to purpose and dive into (Adrai Interview). By using the two in-theater segments, TG Space can create the proper context in which their audience members can play and believe they are visiting the Museum of 2012 in year 2062.

Another tactic of further immersion is by forming the audience into a temporary community and informing them that such a thing has happened. In the first segment of *The Cloud*, the audience is prepared into a tour group who is ready to cope with the strangeness of 2012. Each audience member is given a unifying item – the earphones – and asked to stick together as a group throughout the tour. The earphones provide a rudimentary access to *The Cloud* neural network present in the world of 2062. The origins of *The Cloud* as explained in the piece come from Luc van Loo watching a TV show discussing cloud computing in 2012. Cloud Computing is a recent development in internet technologies that allow users to access applications and data stored on web servers or a network – a fairly recent and well known example is Google Drive; a service which allow users to save, edit, and share documents. Once the documents are on the drive, the user can access them anywhere there is an Internet connection. Luc Van Loo gets the idea, after watching the TV show that a larger cloud that interconnected humanity would end much of daily strife; therefore, he and Petra set out find a Chinese woman who can help convince the Chinese Government to fund such a project.

The above is essentially a creation myth presented by TG Space. The audience members live or experiences the myth by tracing the steps of humanity’s saviors, Petra, Loo, and the Chinese woman. The story relies on a new, but semi-well known recent advancement in technology that has proven so far to bring people closer together in terms of sharing information. TG Space simply takes a large logical step in development of such of idea and by using an advanced version of cloud computing, their future does not seem so far-fetched. Though contemporary Western society is marked by an interconnectivity many people possess in their pockets and in their laptops, primarily facilitated through social media,

which is still rife with the quotidian pretenses that make true and open communication difficult. This proto-Cloud is not like the one presented by TG Space, for their Cloud strips away the pretenses of 2012 and allows humanity to interact on an actual person-to-person basis. That in it of itself is a stretch, but their message is a hopeful one that says simply that we do not have a ubiquitous Cloud now to aid us in interacting, so we have to do the best we can.

### **The Sight of the Audience: Reading the Contemporary City From 50 Years in the Future**

Like in *Dionysus in 69 in 09*, TG Space plays with what place in historical time their audience occupies. When the audience enters the theater space for *The Cloud* Petra begins to immediately cast the audience members as patrons attending the Museum of 2012 in the year 2062. She does this in very simple and playful ways such as complementing individuals on coming dressed in clothes appropriate for the 2012 period. Opening the performance in this manner has two effects: first, it shows the audience members that there is an open dialog or exchange between themselves and the performers. Secondly, it establishes that the audience members have entered a reality, created by TG Space, in which they are regarded as people in 2062. In a sense, Petra and Luc Van Loo have invited their audience into the piece and to play a part along with them – a version of each person in 2062. Petra and Loo in the performance act as themselves in a slightly removed sense. They perform as actors, look-a-likes of the Petra and Loo, who are known through spotty archeological records, which existed in 2012 and were eventually important to the course of history presented in *The Cloud*.

The city streets are possibly the most opposite thing from the black box *The Cloud* begins in. A black box is an environment in which anything can exist without leaving traces, markers, or physical memories that will imprint upon the next thing that occupies the space. The city is over whelmed with signs, symbols, and markers that are constantly changing – a store front is a bakery for fifteen years and then over the course of the month it transforms into a boutique for fashionable wear. The space is

changed, the city is different, and the signs and symbols are all new, but the structure which houses the bakery and now the boutique is awash in memory both etched in the physical properties and in the minds of the people who traverse the streets. *The Cloud* aims to infuse a city, teeming with memory, with the openness that characterizes the black box.

TG Space opens up the possibility for the audience members to view the performance, the city, and themselves through a multitude of frames: You in the future; you in past looking at the future, you in the future looking on the past made strange by TG Space. These frames are manifested strongly during the middle section of *The Cloud*, the tour of the city. During the tour the audience members – particularly those that have accepted TG Space’s context that they are in 2062 – are themselves in 2062 looking upon the city in 2012. At the same time they are still, undeniably their 2012 selves who are treated to a vision of a utopian future. While this might read as a schizophrenic like experience, it is actually subtle rather than jarring and disjointed. The end result of the multiple frames is that each individual is provided with the context to confront TG Space’s question from a perspective they would not normally have. For example, early in the first segment Petra and Loo demonstrate the oddities and stiffness of formalized greeting in 2012 – handshake followed by some piece of information about one’s self – by comically misjudging the ritual. They bemoan how they cannot practice the open and free greeting ritual of the utopic 2062 with the audience, because it would work against the preparing them to experience the 2012 city. Throughout *The Cloud*, there are gentle suggestions that in our contemporary life we are shut-off from one another and at times standoffish. During the tour it is possible for the audience member to see what exactly Petra and Loo are talking about. The frame of a person in the future seeing the past, gives the possibility of them seeing how odd our quotidian world is in actuality . In essence, as Petra puts it, TG Space is asking their audience to “think differently about the now” (Adrai Interview).

*The Cloud* presents a paradox that is quite fascinating: how can we be ourselves and yet be a different person all at the same time? TG Space does not force this duality onto their audience members, but simply opens up the possibility for them to ease into it. As mentioned above, from the moment the audience members enter the first performance space, TG Space begins to playfully say that they are all from 2062. They establish their reality or the reality of *The Cloud*, as the only one they will acknowledge for everyone for the duration of the performance. It then becomes the choice of each individual if they will play along; it is important to note that the audience is not consumed by the reality presented by TG Space. In a sense, the audience member exists between the two times. A person can move fluidly between 2062 and 2012 in the way in which they view their surroundings during the tour. This liminal time that the audience exists in is quite important to the overall effect of the piece. Without a definite fixed time, the audience has the freedom to look at the familiar in a paradoxical fashion. Individuals are removed from the familiar by accepting that they are in 2062; however, they are not totally distant and estranged because they are still themselves from 2012. This paradox allows the audience to look at contemporary society from a unique perspective.

One way of exploring the sight of the audience members during the walking tour is to consider that TG Space is giving them the context so that they may see at a distance. In *Walking in the City*, Michel de Certeau describes the how a person sees the rest of New York City from the top of The World Trade Center: "his elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (92). This is what he describes as panoptic vision – a viewpoint that was desired and fantasized about in pre-modern times where the eye could see the whole berth of a cityscape and fully take it in. It is a perspective that would allow some to see an entire city and read it as a text. Panoptic vision exists now because modernity has provided tall buildings, planes, and helicopters from which one may view the cityscape as whole rather than piece-by-piece

when walking. The power in panoptic sight comes from the physical distance between the viewer and the street. The context of time in *The Cloud* leads the audience to acquire a sort of a panoptic vision. By having the audience members play along with the idea that their actions when walking the city occur in 2062, TG Space creates a separation or distance that allows individuals to read the city from a removed perspective. The perspective is akin to Certeau's panoptic vision in that audience members may read the 2012 cityscape as text. In the everyday setting a person is able to read the city in such a fashion because it is presented in a familiar context.

In a sense, the audience has become tourists of the city. The initial context that TG Space provides is that the simulated city is a museum. Consider that someone who attends a history museum is somewhat like a tourist of the times and places exhibited by the museum. Martin Welton in his article, *Feeling Like a Tourist*, writes that "the pleasure of tourism is not only in the 'picture' of another place upon which one gazes, or which one composes, but also in the extent to which 'other' places present themselves in terms of, and to, 'other' senses as part of the movement of travel" (Welton 48). The distant created by TG Space's treatment of time and establishment of the museum context creates a sensation of alienation or distance between the audience members and the once familiar 2012 Budapest. It is a new place that they are now touring and the distance allows them to create new memories and experiences with different relations. Their "movement of travel" is no longer passive, as it in the quotidian setting; it is an active quest to write new associations and memories just a tourist to a major city is more aware of the tall buildings, monuments, and famous boulevards – landmarks and sights that locals no longer take notice of on a regular basis.

### **Interviews with Pedestrians: Empathy with Distance**

The traveling performance of *The Cloud* is like a bubble that surrounds the audience and TG Space as they walk around the city. At particular points, Petra leaves the bubble to interact with people

on the street. She approaches persons with the question, “Hello, I am from the Institute of Emphatical Studies, could I ask you some questions?” (*The Cloud*). Petra then inquires of the experience living in 2012. She works to engage the pedestrian in a conversation that revolves around of the day-to-day realities of contemporary life. In my interview with Petra she spoke about how very few people have refused to chat with her and that the most common problem is that people on the street will speak for too long or begin to reveal too much information. In most cases, people will speak to Petra on a personal level – revealing facts that one would usually not share with a stranger. Even odder, this occurs under the watchful gaze of 30+ people gathered only a few meters away.

The emotion, worries, cares, and personal stories revealed by the street individuals are perceived in different ways. It is possible that the audience members have emotional responses, because they identify with the person on an emphatic level. The other way is through the distance TG Space provides. The audience members carefully watch street individual and hear their words as if they were anthropologists. It is as though the audience is translating a dead language for the first time as well as learning the everyday practice of some long gone civilization. The feelings of the people interviewed come under intellectual scrutiny at first rather than emotional empathy. This is not to say that TG Space desires a cold hard reasoning only, Petra is an agent of the Institute for Emphatical Research. There is always a later moment for the audience members to take the thoughts had during the walking tour and process them as the present self. That way, one may have a chance to better understand the reasons why we feel the way we do now rather than merely identifying with the feelings of others.

### **Writing an Experience Outside of Time**

There are some difficulties in how one may write their personal narrative in experiencing *The Cloud*. There is simple: I went to a play like event, we walked outside for a bit, and then we went back to the theater for a last bit. The description is prone to many more complications such as, We entered the

pre-museum of 2062; we went out into 2062, but we were still our 2012 selves in some ways; I walked streets I knew, but they were different because the performer said I was a person of 2062; we returned to the theater where we were eased back into our 2012 selves fully. What is similar between the simple and complex narratives is that they both involve the audience member doing something in the performance event. That opens up a world of possibilities as to how one may write their personal narrative. During *The Cloud* the complexity is dependent on how much an individual chooses to accept the reality presented by TG Space. Michel de Certeau writes that “the act of walking is the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered,” or, to walk in a city is to write a particular type of narrative – one that traces motion over a time and marks the liminal space between two destinations (97). In *The Cloud* we see the combination of Certeau’s walking narrative among multiple spectators, written narrative by TG Space – the first and third section, the speech of *The Cloud* itself and the guided journey to the Standard Mandarin –, and improvised interviews which temporarily invites the narratives of pedestrians into the event. The summation of all the narratives is the complete performance of *The Cloud*.

The tour of the city stands in opposition to an assertion made by Certeau: that when a pedestrian travels in the city they, “lack a place,” for to walk is to perpetuate “the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” or as stated above, to walk is to exist in transit and liminality until a new fixed location is reached (103). However, in *The Cloud*, the walking – which is both a creation of narratives as well as tracing of a particular narrative – is in a place. The place is the performance event itself that, like a bubble surrounding the audience and performers, resists the interpretation of Certeau. The purpose of walking in *The Cloud* is not to merely move from one physical location to another, but to actively pursue the narratives presented by TG Space. As the audience follows the story of the day that process that saved humankind was enacted, they are writing an experiential narrative. The audience members’ narrative is not covered in a shadow, as it is when there is only quotidian ways

of seeing. The city is not the city, it is a museum and therefore a distinct place. The museum-cityscape becomes the stage that Petra and Luc Van Loo's drama is played out while at the same time it is also the place where new narratives are written by the walking of the audience. Those narratives are not lost to the city itself; rather they disappear in the way in which all performance disappears as it is created and becomes memory.

### **Thinking Differently is Seeing Differently; Seeing Differently is Thinking Differently**

*The Cloud* purposes a positive outlook of the future. A future in which civilization as a whole has dropped concepts of discrimination, standoffishness, and other behaviors that alienates us from each other and cause tension. The arrangement of the piece and the frames it contains makes it so that TG Space is not simply showing a possible future. Instead, they give the opportunity to see the past (which is our present) through their proposed utopian future. This is not to say, however, that the group is presenting a guide, manifesto, or plan of some kind to achieve the future they have invented. Instead, *The Cloud*, and the 2062 they created is all towards allowing the audience "to think different[ly] about the now" (Adrai Interview).

It is TG Space's drive to aid their audience in seeing the present in a different way that not only aids to the interest in their work, but the necessity of it. They have styled their work as "politics of the personal" and it shows quite clearly in their techniques of performance making, use of space, and audience engagement techniques (TG Space Website). *The Cloud* is a piece which effectively invites the audience to contribute their physical presences, intellect, and their emotional presences to the event. They move with Petra and Luc van Loo through the city, encased in an invisible, but quite noticeable bubble which is the performance itself. Without the individual's consent to agree to TG Space's proposal of the Museum of 2012, the piece would fail. *The Cloud* is also a prime example of how theatre performed in non-theatrical spaces can aid in the audience writing their experience of in a different

fashion where they say, 'I watched the play' versus 'I moved through the city, things happened as we went along, and I saw things differently'. As a whole, *The Cloud*, works toward creating moments where the performers are not the only ones transformed, but the audience is as well. Even if that transformation is only for a moment, it is a time and a place where the individual has the space to confront questions that are difficult to wrestle with under normal circumstances. That effect in it of itself is an incredible achievement.

## Chapter V

### Having the Audience Play: Actorless Performance Events in *Now, Now, Oh, Now*

“To inject destiny, no matter how apparently trivial, back in to theater restores danger, excitement, and vitality” – Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, 80.

“It is not by chance that in many languages that the word for play and to play is the same” – Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, 77.

When I asked Shawn Sides, artistic director of the Rude Mechanicals, what the collective wanted from their audience who attended *Now Now Oh Now* she took a moment to think about the question. In the piece, the audience members are asked, among other things, to solve puzzles, to work in groups, to make miniature landscapes, and to help move along the action of the play. After thinking for a time, Shawn replies, “we wanted to invite their intellectual presence into the room” (Sides Interview). *Now Now Oh Now (NNON)* does that successfully along with creating a unique story that is partially driven by the actions of the audience. The piece is the product of several years of workshop productions and sporadic rehearsal periods; and is still not completed. It is then no surprise that in the course of *Now Now Oh Now* the audience is asked to collaborate with the Rude Mechanicals and to essentially help in writing the action and experience in every performance of the piece. The Rudes accomplish this with certain techniques that lead to a performance experience in which the audience members are aware of the value of their actions in the context of the performance event. Every person knows that they are needed to make the performance happen.

### Background: From Pynchon to Bronte

The Rudes began the creation of *Now Now Oh Now* with two areas of inquiry: “how do we play games” and “how can we get the audience to play games” (Sides Interview). The first iteration was a production presented as a one-off workshop in November 2010 entitled CL1000P. It was a single act play that was derived from Thomas Pynchon’s novel of conspiracies and paranoia in the 1960s, *The Crying of Lot 49*. The action was presented presentational style with the audience seated in chairs arranged in raked rows. What was different in the initial production was that the dramatic action would stop at planned points and the audience was asked to collectively solve puzzles in a fixed amount of time. This was accomplished by shouting instructions to the lead character that acted as a sort of avatar or mouse pointer for the audience. The idea was that the plot or action of the play would only continue if the audience solved the puzzle before a timer ran out. The second difference was that the play was followed by a small alternate reality game (ARG) that took place in the areas near the theater space. The first clue was a phone number which was spelled out on the final set of the play by lights which shined on the digits. The phone number led to a website, the website led to GPS coordinates and a radio broadcast, and those led to a location behind some nearby apartment complexes. There, the Rudes had spray painted a message on a slab of concrete for the few audience members who solved the ARG<sup>6</sup>. The message was that they should return to the theater space a few days later to give feedback and to have a party, a reward for seeing the piece all the way through to the end.

CL1000P was shelved for over a year. The rights to Pynchon’s novel were not available and the ARG component, while incredibly engrossing and exciting, was not a feasible element to tour. Time also changed the focus of the Rudes. After a year, they revisited the piece for a second workshop in which they approached the work “with a deeper desire for a more immersive environment and a more

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<sup>6</sup> About 20 remained out of the 100 people who were present at the beginning of the workshop performance.

scientific context for the work” (Now, Now, Oh, Now Information). For the second workshop, also titled CL1000P, the playing space was expanded to three separate rooms<sup>7</sup> in which an act of the play would occur. The plot revolved around a group of individuals who had created a game for themselves in a dark Bronte inspired world called “Melsinvorne,” which the audience witnesses in the third act (CL1000P (February 2012)). The new scientific influence was infused into the play through the Ornithologist, who in the second act weaves a delicate speech about the aesthetic selection found in bower birds along with the story of how Melsinvorne ended with the death of one of its players. The Rudes bring in the immersive elements with the first act, where the audience is required to solve a number of puzzles in order to advance the dramatic action of the performance. The current incarnation, Now, Now, Oh Now, is an updated version of CL1000P (February 2012), however, it is not the final performance; The Rude’s continue to develop their original works even after significant public runs.

### **Talismans, Puzzles, and Performance without Actors**

*NNON* is arranged in three acts that occur in different spaces within the theater complex. The acts are: the audience solving puzzles in the Ornithologist’s office; then, the audience is seated around a long table while the Ornithologist talks to it; and finally, the audience witnesses the end of the Melsinvorne which occurs in a Victorian-esque drawing room. The ticket counter, which is outside of theater spaces in the courtyard of The Off Center, did not provide paper tickets or programs for the piece. Instead, everyone claiming a ticket was asked to pick a talisman that would act as his or her ticket to enter the performance. The brown clay talisman was about the size of a quarter and imprinted with one of six different symbols such as a claw, trident, horn, or a leaf. The audience members when choosing their talismans is not told what significance it has and they are left to wonder what importance the symbols hold. The function of the symbols on the talismans is explained fully at the beginning of the

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<sup>7</sup> The Off Center contains three spaces used for performance: the flexible performance space (where the first CL1000P was staged), The Center Center, and The Off Shoot.

first act: each symbol is for a clan that audience members are divided into. The choice of the talisman is tied to the themes the performance explores more in depth in the second and third acts, namely, how a person's choice influence the choice of others and so on and so forth. When audience members choose their talisman they can only select from what is available at the time they arrive. Therefore, availability of options for each person is determined by chance. Whatever clan an audience member ends up in directly influences their experience in the participatory elements of *NNON*, meaning that even before the audience is aware that the performance has started they are doing actions that drastically shape their experience and the way in which they write it.

According to director Shawn Sides, the performance begins with each audience member choosing a talisman (Sides Interview). It is important to mark the beginning of the performance as when each individual receives their own talisman because each self-written and self-actualized experience of *NNON* begins at different times for each member of the audience. The content before the first act starts - the waiting, the examining of the talismans, the comparing symbols with others, etc - is part of the performance event, because it is a planned part of the experience even though it is driven by the audience. The Rudes aimed to create a sense of mystery and excitement by not providing all the necessary information regarding the talismans. The essential function the talisman has before the first act is that they break the audience's expectations of how to behave at this theatrical event. The audience members know something is different from the moment they are asked to choose a talisman versus the typical behavior pattern in which they are simply handed a ticket and asked to wait for the auditorium to open. The act of choosing a particular symbol signifies that audience choice is an element of the performance and that each individual will have some significant responsibility in determining their experience of the event. This small choice pays off at the beginning of the first act, when the symbols divide the audience into separate groups.

Act one begins with the Gamemaster, a young man dressed casually and sporting some live action roleplaying regalia, beckons the audience to follow him around the side of The Off Center to a side door. The Gamemaster's role in *NNON* is not only character, but also sort of a stage manager and guide. At the door he goes through the usual pre-show requests along with a few non-ordinary ones that signal something different is about to occur, such as no bags are allowed during the show and checking to make sure that everyone still have their talisman handy. The Gamemaster then leads the audience into the act one space, The Center Center, which is filled with the intricate puzzles primed for the clans to tackle. Once the Gamemaster has brought the audience members around him, he informs them that they have been gathered to solve puzzles and that they symbol on the talisman indicates which clan they are in. He gives the audience members time to arrange themselves into their six clans of five persons. Each clan is comprised of individuals who did not arrive together – the system of choosing the talisman is set up in such a fashion that parties checking their reservations together could not select tokens with the same symbol. The Gamemaster then gives each clan an envelope and then departs with the warning that they only have fifteen minutes to complete their tasks. The envelopes contain a set of instructions that lead each group to the first puzzle they are to solve. For the next fifteen minutes the action of *NNON* is entirely driven by audience participation. It is action that is non-linear, and specific to each individual.

Each clan's quest is a different route with a different set of puzzles to solve. The routes eventually converge with the six groups becoming three; and then the audience reforms into a singular group at the end of the fifteen minutes. Upon completing the second puzzle a group is presented with choice between two items – e.g. a compass, a knife, a potion – they can give to the Gamemaster. The six groups place their selected item upon a pedestal and when the Gamemaster returns, he rolls a six-sided die to determine which item will return later in the evening. The selected item is stored away in a secret panel above a fireplace. He then asks if the audience members have found a key and if they have he compliments them on their skills before letting them move onto act two. If they are not successful with the key related puzzles, the Gamemaster laments their performance and says he is doing them a favor by letting them continue on.

The overall question is what does it mean to invite an audience to participate? During act one the audience members are mostly in charge of writing their experience of the performance. Without actors to spectate and no clearly defined area of the space that is for performance, the audience is left to its own whims. Schechner writes that “when there is participation, everyone in the theater tests destiny and gambles with fortune” which is what happens during the first act of *NNON* (79). There is



always the possibility of the audience not behaving in a desired fashion, for it has been given the power as co-writers of the performance and what sort of experience each individual will have. The decision to invite the audience to participate is more risky to the artists than it is to the audience in *NNON*. The performers have a message they wish to transmit through participatory activities and presentational theatre; to coerce or force the audience into acting would certainly hamper the transmission. A coerced audience is resentful, fearful, and will not collaborate well within itself or with the performers.

The success of the participation both in act one and later comes from the Rude's inviting the audience to become an intelligent collaborator of the production. Sides says that a constant goal with their audience was "inviting their intelligence" into the performance (Sides Interview). Peggy Phelan in discussing Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* – a piece in which Abramovic was subject to the whims of an aggressive audience – wrote that the audience is a co-author in the event because "the possibility of mutual transformation occurs during the enactment of the event" (qtd. In Freshwater 63). Applying that same standard to *NNON* we see that the techniques of participation the Rudes employ create the similar situation that occurred in *Rhythm 0*. It happens in the sense of the Rudes trusting their audience members to drive aspects of the performance forward through their active engagement. For the audience members, their active writing of the event is their transformation from spectators to co-authors of that particular performance of *NNON*. The mutual transformation to the performers occurs in the final turn of the third act when an object selected in act one, by the result of puzzle solving and chance, forces a particular ending for the performance. It also occurs in two other ways for performers. First, in dealing with any kind of participation, the possibility of unplanned or at least not thought of incidents will occur, requiring the performers to improvise in such a way that preserves the environment they have created. In the three times I attended *NNON* the Ornithologist modified her long speech act two speech in small ways to better fit each audience. She also had to compensate for the outcome of the random elements such as the dice-game and the miniature world building, which prompted some of

the changes. The second transformation that the audience causes on the performers is more subtle. In the case of the Rude Mechanicals, the performance changes from the constant audience feedback they ask for and receive. The changes happen over the long term in the gaps between workshops, as well as, from and show to show during a run.

Act one is where the majority of participation in *NNON* occurs and it is a kind of participation that is markedly different from the other kinds as discussed previously. It is similar in that it serves to enrich the experience and advance the dramatic action. Without the audience's consent to participate the play would fail; primarily, because the item selected by the Gamemaster at the end of the act returns at the near end of act three as a trigger for what ending is played out. This participation is akin to the social events present in *Dionysus in 69* in that it is non-linear and semi-improvised within a structure. The Rudes provide fifteen minutes, sets of instructions, a room full of puzzles, and then they let things happen. It is the will and drive of the audience that shapes the action that is occurring all throughout the first space. There is no compulsion to participate, instead the Rudes rely on a few key devices to make participation work: that the audience is not performing for anyone, that the clan grouping creates a safer place to share, and the joy many people get out of solving puzzles or games. Aside from the very beginning and end of the act, there are no performers present, only the audience is there who have the choice to assume the role of spectator-actors. The audience members are charged with the task of providing the action of first act for themselves; the Rudes have given them a set to work in, actions to accomplish, and motivation via clues and defined goals. The audience is performing for no one, because the performance begins without drawing clear division between what is theatrical and what is participatory. What is present in *NNON* is a situation that defies typical definitions of theatrical and performance events: performance without performers.

With no one to perform for, the audience members have a much easier time in making the decision to participate as there is no fear of observation from eyes expecting a performance. In act one, there is no theatre. The theatrical event, that is to say *Now Now Oh Now* as a production, is used as an umbrella over the social event. The talismans and the clans they determine serve a very important purpose in the act. According to Shawn Sides this was done because they “just wanted a clean slate, for everyone to start from even...so that no one had an advantage” (Interview). The clans are made up of six people who most likely did not know each other and therefore had no preconditioned presumptions about the abilities of one another. Everyone is working from the same place, that is, there are puzzles to solve in a limited amount of time.

Act one prompts the question: Is this theatre? Jerzy Grotowski in *Towards a Poor Theatre* wrote that theatre is “what takes place between the spectator and actor,” yet act one of *NNON* is about what takes place between the audience members themselves, as well as the interactions the audience members have with the environment (32). In a sense, the majority of act one does not contain performance per se. The audience members are asked to do actions, to complete tasks, and to ensure the rest of the play can happen. They are not asked to play a part or occupy a role with a dramatic function: according to Sides, the audience is not cast in a particular role and they remain the same throughout the piece (Sides Interview). The audience’s collective actions are a function of making *NNON* work as an entire piece that can reach completion. *NNON* does not begin as a play or a piece theatre; it starts out as a social event that becomes a full theatre piece by the third act. There is the option to watch the proceedings, to not participate in solving the puzzles; however the actions the audience members perform are not within the dramatic action of the play. Therefore, there is no play to watch, but only the non-theatrical actions of others. Those actions are part of the performance event in forming the experience of *NNON*, but the actions are not tempered by the context of the dramatic elements at the moment they are done by the audience members.

The dramatic action does not begin in earnest until act two. In the act one space, which is the office of the ornithologist, there are deliberately placed items – e.g. maps, books on birds, letters, pictures, ect – to create an atmosphere that the piece exists in. The entire act as a whole is a sort of method of creating an atmosphere of thoughts before the dramatic and performative parts of *NNON* occur. It allows the audience members to engage in game playing, collaboration, and rapid problem solving; those ideas are later explored in the performative parts of the piece. The participatory experience in *NNON* is then one that provide the Rudes with a way in which to share with the audience some of the larger ideas of the piece to a much greater effect than if just presented through performance. The audience member does not say, ‘I saw *NNON*,’ but ‘I did *NNON*.’ The first act ends with a promise, that the object selected through chance and the puzzle solving actions of the audience will return at some point. The promise is that the actions that have just taken place actually matter outside of personal experience and have direct consequence on the dramatic action. It is explicitly telling the audience members that they matter to the event.

### **A Lecture and a Live Action Roleplaying Game or Acts Two and Three**

The participation in the piece does not conclude with the transition to the second act, but it does lessen considerably. In the second act, which takes place in the Off Center’s flexible performance space, the audience members are seated about a long table while a single performer, Hannah Kenah or Lana Lesley, speaks to them as the Ornithologist. On the long sides of the space, two darkened, oversized dioramas rest against the walls. Once seated at the table, the audience members drinks a cordial with the ornithologist who then begins her lecture/talk. During the ornithologist’s talk about aesthetic selection in bower birds, she instructs the audience to use the material in front of them – a corkboard, a rock, a stick, a metal lid, and other pieces – to construct a little model world. A small game to demonstrate the randomness of life is played which involves each person rolling a six sided die. The

ornithologist then instructs those who rolled an odd number to scoot their chairs back five feet from the table because they have died in a fire. She concludes her speech with a bit of spectacle. She pulls the tablecloth off the table, along with whatever is on it, to reveal a 3D diorama/map of the world she had created with her friends, Melsinvorne, built inside of the long table. She exits unseen and the audience is left for a moment to examine the map and to wonder what is next.



The Gamemaster does not reappear to lead them on, nor does any other performer. Then, at what seems like the point at which the audience might assume the performance is over, a bird's feather falls onto the table. Wrapped around it is a small sheet of paper with symbols. It is another puzzle. It requires the audience to use markers in the map to decode a message. After the audience members have worked together, they discover that the message is to turn the plaque attached to one of the oversized dioramas; when turned, a hidden door on the diorama slides open allowing the audience to pass through and reach a door to the outside of the Off Center.

The walk to the third act takes the audience behind the Off Center to the side door of the smaller space, The Off Shoot. Inside is the drawing room of the characters in the Melsinvorne game. The space is set up with the performers already acting their parts in period dress. The lighting is dark and moody with occasional lighting flashes. The sound of the storm comes, comically, from vocal effects made by the performers. This mix of technical elements controlled from the booth and performers making environmental sound effects points to the Rude's attempt to mix the game playing of Live Action RPGs and theatre. The audience sits in chairs on set up on the circular bound of the performing space. Once all have been seated, the sequence of events that led to the end of the game, Melsinvorne, and the life of the Ornithologist's lover unfold<sup>8</sup>. During the act, the performers play parlor games, sing Melsinvorne's theme song, declare actions in the third person, and switch between their in-game persona and their character. These game playing elements contrast sharply with the intense dramatic story unfolding. The contrasting elements and juxtapositions are enjoyable and interesting rather than detrimental to the performance. Throughout however, the audience is not invited to participate. The audience members are totally outside of the world in front of them until the conclusion. The Ornithologist's lover, frustrated by the rules of the game they have created, threatens to quit. Before he can walk out the door, and subsequently die in the real world<sup>9</sup>, the action halts.

At this point, the Ornithologist freezes the scene and begins to address the audience as herself and as the character she was playing in Melsinvorne. She talks about how choice is always present and that other possibilities exist if the right choices are made. She then invokes the power of the Gamemaster, who quickly appears from behind a bookshelf. He tells her that there is one chance to save her lover, a special item. He hits a panel in the fireplace and it drops to reveal a compartment

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<sup>8</sup> This scene is a flashback of sorts as the Ornithologist in act two tells the audience vague details about how the game ended and the death that caused it.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that he does not die from leaving the game itself. In act two, the Ornithologist remarks how if the conditions before his death had been slightly different, he might have lived. It is implied he died in some sort of accident, possibly a car related one.

containing the item semi-randomly chosen in act one. Here is where the fruit of creation is revealed: it is the way in which the performance can complete. The completion of the performance is made up of the effort the audience members put into the puzzling solving of the first act and the element of chance brought by the Rudes. It is at this point the multitude of layers is shown clearly and then put into intersections – the game of Melsnivorne, the world of the Ornithologist, and the world that the audience occupies. The real actions of the audience become fully intertwined with the rehearsed actions of the Rudes; it becomes easy to see how the lines between games, theatre, and life are not so definite. The item either triggers one of two endings: in the good/happy, ending, a choreographed, but humorous dance is performed with Barry Manilow’s “Could It Be Magic”; or, in the bad/sad ending, the same song plays while the performers stand silently<sup>10</sup>. Either way, the performers exit out the back, the audience through the front door where they are finally given a program.

### **What Does it Mean to do *Now Now Oh Now*?**

While act one is mostly absent of performance and performers, it is still an aspect of the performance event as a whole. The Rudes gives the audience members the ways by which they can drive the performance forward and eventually cause it to conclude. The participatory elements created for the piece were made to have a direct effect on the performance as a whole because, as Sides puts it, “participation needs to have consequence not only on the final narrative, but something has to happen or not happen because of what the audience does. There needs to be cause and effect” (Sides Interview). The largest cause and effect moment is the ending decided by the object, but throughout there are several others that impact the audience’s experience of the performance. The rate at which each group solves the puzzles in act one determines how much of the act they will experience; the delay to solve the puzzle between act two and three influences the pace of the performance; and the little

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<sup>10</sup> Shawn Sides in my interview with her said that they had wanted to have four endings, but simply ran out of time. The result was a joyous, humorous ending and a painfully awkward one.

world building in act two is more than just a fun activity – it is a symbol of how each person builds an unique experience with the tools provided. The Rudes show an incredible trust in their audience members to conduct their own writing of parts of the performance. What transpires is a more overt collaboration between the artists and their audience. Of course, the Rudes have more control, but the amount they cede to the audience is enough to allow the audience members some authorship of the event as well as not cause them to become overwhelmed. The audience members are comfortable in their participation because they do not have to play a part, they are not performing for anyone, and every person is subjected to the same initial experience or the same choice to participate. No one person is ever singled out to do anything different; instead, the burden of the participatory elements is placed on the whole entity of the audience. The participation is meaningful because not only does it change the outcome of the piece, it goes further and makes the audience understand their necessary function in the performance.

By the conclusion of *NNON* the audience should walk into the open air with a feeling that something was left incomplete. Not necessarily in a negative fashion, but what remains after the performance is an experience that is both individualistic and collectivistic. Each audience member is aware that their choices from the talisman, to the object, and even in the tiny table top world was part of their own self-crafted experience. Yet, at the same time, it is difficult to get away from the collective of the audience and the trust the Rudes in it. Each performance is something written by that particular audience together. This is true of any kind of performance, but the Rude’ s bring this unique facet of the art to the forefront in *NNON*.

### **The Work is Never Finished**

Shawn Sides says that the piece is not finished; that she and company want to revisit it, primarily to work on the participatory elements. Apparently, the shift from total participation, to a small

amount of participation, to none over the course of the three acts was planned, but not what they wanted. Sides reported to me that occasionally audiences would arrive at the act three space and some members would start looking for clues, puzzles to solve, or anything they could do to help the performance. It seems as though when audience members are presented with the expectation that their action is needed to make the piece happen, then some will do whatever they can help it along. What is next for *Now Now Oh Now* is looking at the participatory elements and seeing how the urge to make the performance happen is satisfied throughout the piece. However, until *The Rude Mechanicals* present the work again, their most recent rendition still shows that audiences are not only willing, but excited about becoming active writers of a performance.

The standout feature that characterizes *Now Now Oh Now* is the *Rude Mechanicals*' invitation to the audience. The participation that is offered in the piece is not a novelty or a gimmick, but a chance for the audience members to shape their experience and make their actions affect the piece. The effort the *Rude*'s show towards giving the audience a chance to write part of the play is admirable. The theatre they create has the potential to resonate with the audience on a level that presentational theatre cannot achieve. That level being the opportunity for an audience member to look back on the performance and say, 'I was necessary.'

### Afterword

People are seeking, maybe even unconsciously, a connection between other people that manifests tangible results. In the participatory theatre those sorts of connections are available for audience and the artists. Participation transform theatre into events that uniquely dynamic in the exchange between people in that the exchanges facilitate the collective creation of experiences. Are the performers tricking the public; deceiving them into believing in false worlds that disappear after ninety minutes? In some ways yes, but in the four productions discussed care was taken to make sure that the audience members were they themselves throughout the events. The reason why these pieces matter is that they strive to mix the imaginary, devised, and co-authored with elements of the quotidian in the hope that the audience members will have a new way of engaging their everyday lives. Participation allows the audience to practice the message of the artist in a safe environment; they get to test without repercussions. Even if it is something as mild as seeing their city in a different way or as intense as one learning how they physically connect with others.

The participation found in *Dionysus* and in *NNON* brings strangers together and asks them to aid in building the performance experience that moves the dramatic action towards a conclusion. From talking to the director, Shawn Sides, and my own experience with the pieces, audiences were willing to throw themselves into the performances. In *NNON*, people were excited by the opportunity to solve puzzles that directly influenced the action of the play even in groups of total strangers. On the surface,

one could say it was because the puzzles were a fun challenge to tackle, however, I believe that the audience was engaged on a deeper level of understanding. The audience knew that their actions mattered or would matter to the performance event and were excited by the possibility of their collective action having actual results. Their willingness was so overt, that Sides was taken aback; believing, in the case of *Dionysus*, that people would sit up against the walls in fear of the performance and the performers. In fact, the only performance of *Dionysus*, in the audience was tepid was the tour to Princeton University. Sides and the performers have theorized the lack of participation in that instance was the result of a very academically minded audience who wished to study the piece rather than involve themselves with it. Outside of that incident, audiences gave themselves over to the performance.

The connection between *Dionysus in 69 in 09*, *The Living Room*, *The Cloud*, and *Now Now Oh Now* is that the participation utilized is for the sake of establishing a more direct connection between the audience and the performance. Through that, the experience of the audience is enriched and the message, thought, or theme of the artists is clearer in that the audience has contributed actions that bring the message forward. The participatory elements are not ornamental and they are not novelties. They are not the entire purpose of the performance. They are used to bring about the purpose of the show in a way that presentation could not accomplish. The greatest unifying factor is that the participation in the four events works in ways to share ownership of the performance with the audience. Each demonstrates to the audience members that they are needed; and that their willingness and consent is required for the performance to manifest in incredible ways. The success or failure of these events relies on what the audiences brings to it – their energy, their creativity, and their willingness to believe the given circumstances provided by the artists. It is a significant risk for the artists, but it is worth it. When participation work and an audience give itself over the performance wonderful, exciting, things can transpire.

An increasing number of artists are finding participation useful in their work, both in small and large ways. There is a need a continually experiment with how the audience relates to performance. However, care is needed, for audiences are delicate. Artists should never forget that they must invite their audiences to join in and that audiences must feel safe in what they are doing. In a sense, audiences must be made to forget that they are at a performance. The best way to do that is to turn the performance into something else that operates in the space between real-life and performance. What is experienced in the spaces is so much more real and then more readily taken up into the lives of the audiences.

More work is needed in actually interviewing audiences who have experienced participatory events. One may look to the reviews of critics, but they have the eyes and tastes of a specialized sort of theatregoer. Much of the purpose of participatory elements is to benefit the experience that audiences have. Writers on this topic need more information as to what individuals feel about participation. We need to document the praise for the elements, criticism against, hopes, fears, doubts, and whatever else someone is willing to divulge. What is safe to presume is the desire to engage in participatory elements if those elements are presented in certain fashions as they are in the pieces discussed previously.

Without a doubt, we are collectively and rapidly changing the ways in which we socialize. The result is that we are also quickly developing different ways of conceiving of the self and how the identity of the self is written. The theatre is needed to deal with such emerging issues. Participation, as I have asserted, mitigates the experience of fragmentation by replacing it with a whole narrative experience. The participatory theatre becomes a refuge for contemporary audiences; a place at which they are awake only to what is before them and not the myriad of socializations available elsewhere. It is a simplification of things that brings a bit of peace to individuals. It is a place where audiences can practice being human on a personal level.

There is a movement in theatre that is the opposite of what I suggest. It is in the form of theaters opening themselves up to the possibility of concepts like 'tweet-seats' or specific areas of the auditorium where cell phone use is allowed. On its face it appears as though theater companies are trying to keep up with the times, though in reality it is a limp marketing ploy. At worst, it is depriving audience members of the special quality theatre contain – liveness. The movement tells audience members it is okay for them to not focus their awareness to what is happening on stage; to not become involved emotionally and intellectually; to not care with their entire self. Theatre makers put so much hard work into creating believable world, characters, and emotions in the hopes that someone watching will gleam some truth in it all. Thankfully, participation resists this movement fiercely by inviting the audience members to find actively seek truth for themselves.

There is an impulse to connect to others and that theatre and performance can facilitate that impulse. It does so in the context of the performances that causes the performers and the audience to focus in on the present moment. In that moment, collaboration can happen and something wonderful and unique can come from it. Theatre is one of the few remaining places in which people come to have a live experience with other people. Much else in life is mediated in some fashion or the mediated world creeps into our present moments. Inside the context of theatre, the dramatic action draws us into the moment and the participatory elements makes that present moment the most important thing occurring. There is something wonderful about giving people an hour and half to focus and to build something with others even if it is just an experience. It is all done within moments that are clear, alive, and present.

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