

The Spectre of the Real in Theatre

Regina's Haunted History Through Site-Specific Performance

by Andrew Houston

A Real Night(mare) in Regina

In January, 2000 I took a position in the Theatre Department of the University of Regina. Not sure if I would stay there, and not keen on the idea of moving my family across Saskatchewan in the middle of winter, I decided to live there on my own for the first term and get my bearings. My wife and children were a five-hour drive away, so I planned to rent a room and live in Regina during the week, and travel to my family on weekends. Deciding that my best option was to find a room in a house downtown, I moved into a nice old house in the city's Cathedral district. Having moved from Lloydminster, a small city with little architecture pre-dating 1960, it was a pleasure to be living in a place with lovely old buildings. Regina has been graced by talented architects, and its relatively slow economy (as compared with cities such as Calgary or Edmonton) has meant that old buildings have been left standing, not torn down to create the appearance of progress. Even the house in which I rented a room was at least 70 years old, and I could see traces of its history every time I climbed the staircase and saw the marks of past inhabitants; when I slept in my room and could hear how the building 'spoke' through its structure, the creaks and squeaks in response to its other occupants, and the rumbles and vibrations through pipes and ducts.

By my third night, I was becoming pretty well acquainted with my place in this house. As I unpacked my things, gradually my room was reflecting my presence. I was able to cook, eat and sleep comfortably, but I had no phone service, nor had I become acquainted with any of my housemates. Keen to get my courses prepared and underway at the University I was only home at night during this first week. On this particular night, I came home at about 8:00 p.m., while eating my dinner noticed for the first time the sounds of music and conversation coming from my neighbour. I appreciated these sounds of other housemates, of company, as I reflected on my own state of separation from my family. These vibes of a good time lulled me to sleep through the wall. But this good vibe went horribly wrong as I awoke to sounds of violence at about 2:30 a.m. Slowly realising these sounds were not a nightmare, I lay awake in a state of paralysed self-debate about what could be happening and what I should do. I could hear the sounds of a woman's voice pleading, the sounds of a man's voice accusing, the thuds and other noises of impact that punctuated the voices. I had no phone for calling the police, and for what seemed like hours I felt I could not leave my bed – despite its close proximity to the wall through which the violence reverberated. In this moment I was struck by the 'unreal' reality of what I was experiencing; I was overwhelmed by a sense of non-comprehension to what was happening as it happened. In retrospect, I realised my nightmarish experience on this night was akin to the 'real', as outlined in the psychoanalytic-linguistic work of Jacques Lacan. For Lacan the real is essentially traumatic and resistant to symbolization, it is at once the impenetrable core of experience and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency.¹ I was caught in a kind of purgatory of the real, between the reality of physical violence and my peculiar experience of it – through a wall, half-awake, and in a still unfamiliar room. This purgatory went on for a couple of hours until someone else in the house had the sense to call the police. Then came sounds of the aftermath, the heavy footfalls of the police, the muffled crying, the sounds of detective work, and finally an opportunity to

¹ See *October* 58: *Rendering the Real A Special Issue*, guest editor Parveen Adams (Fall 1991).

make a statement – with a promise of a date in court as a ‘witness’ to what had happened that night.

It was hard to live in this house after what had happened. I managed to stay for another couple of weeks, while other arrangements were made. The house was haunted with the reverberations of the violence of the attack. The landlady, away the night of the attack but with the best intentions, spoke about some kind of ritual of cleansing the house of the bad aura from the event, a kind of exorcism of the residual leftover of the experience for all of us who had endured it. This, again, reminded me of the Lacanian real; while My landlady’s intentions seemed like a positive step toward recovery of the situation, but I wondered how helpful this would be for me. The anguish and shame that permeated the house was at once palpable and precarious. Attempts to identify the effect of my experience somehow failed, or existed in shadow, dissolving as soon as I tried to grasp it. I did not have nightmares of the event; however, the experience of just being in my room was changed forever, and just the act of going to bed was unsettling. In discussing my situation with colleagues, many reflected upon how the traumatic aftershock of this event seemed like a haunting; one colleague, quite interested in ghosts and paranormal activity, suggested that the negative energy left behind from a traumatic event – often ending in death – was the source of most haunting. Moreover, he suggested that the neighbourhood I lived in, replete with old houses, was a centre of paranormal activity in Regina.

Sadly, this negative early experience of living in Regina reaffirmed many of the stereotypes the city endures from the perspective of people living in other parts of Saskatchewan, or even in other parts of western Canada. Before going, I was warned that Regina is the west’s crime capital, and that I would be at great risk there; site unseen, there were plenty of stories about violent incidents that haunted my imagination of this city. I had to admit, I was not accustomed to witnessing such violence so close to – indeed, within my – home. Yet, under the spell of the positive potential of a new job, and my growing fascination with environmental theatre practices, I was able to draw a kind of inspiration from this event. My experience of this night seemed to offer insight into at least four areas of concern for me as a teacher and practitioner of theatre. The first was to do with the role of the witness in the context of site-specific theatre practices; the second was to do with the site of the event itself, and how events can trigger – and be considered in and of themselves – real, in the Lacanian sense, or as I would like to suggest, hauntings; the third was how the dramaturgical weave of the first two, site and witness, might give rise to an experience that challenges how we define the real as either a referent or a signified of theatrical practices. The fourth concerned dramaturgy, and how its applied practices, both in university programs and in the profession, made it an attractive part of theatre practice to begin experimenting with the above innovations to theatrical form. In my first few classes of teaching a production dramaturgy course at the University of Regina, it seemed the students were haunted by some of these concerns as well.

A Dramaturgy Dream at the University of Regina

As is the case with any new faculty, there is always a feeling of ‘filling the shoes’ of your predecessor in your department. Your syllabus, your first few classes, and your whole approach to the course is without doubt haunted by the approach of your predecessor. In the production dramaturgy class the influence of the previous teacher was pronounced. I figured that the best way to deal with this situation was to face it head-on and actively solicit my students’ perceptions about the course. As it turned out, their expectations were entirely in keeping with my predecessor’s approach. For the most part, my students were concerned about dramaturgy being long on research and paperwork while being short on creativity and practical application. As a way of demonstrating my faith in their spontaneous, creative abilities, I went through an imaging exercise

with them from Augusto Boal's *Rainbow of Desire*. When asked to create tableau of a "nightmare dramaturgy experience" repeatedly I saw images of being buried in paperwork; of researchers banished to the library, far from the creative process on the stage; of the tokenism often given to contextual research in the production process; and overwhelmingly I saw images of isolation. By contrast, their images of a "dream dramaturgy experience" were replete with the energy of creativity, collectivity, and projects that were relevant to their lives, and their experience of living in Regina. My students' dream images featured dramaturges at the centre of the creative process of making a performance, and the role of the dramaturge appeared to be redefining the process of theatre creation; here theatre looked more like the birth of a child, a rave, or a party. Interestingly, none of these images appeared to be happening in a theatre.

This flowering of imagery in the classroom, coming from students who feared it was their destiny to endure a production dramaturgy class full of assignments fated only for my desk and evaluation, offered me insight not unlike that of the incident in my rooming house. In terms of the profession, I thought, dramaturgy need not be stuck in 'a little room' of conventional usage, representing the stimuli of the world beyond the door. Perhaps dramaturgical strategies might be utilised to creatively engage with real experiences that, although ineffable and beyond symbolization, are revealed to haunt the symbolic order of the purpose-built room. Indeed, if a majority of professional theatre has become stuck in purpose-built spaces, obviously it is because there is great benefit in being there. Many professional theatres across Canada boast state-of-the-art lighting and sound systems; these facilities offer the best equipment for realising the dreams of theatre artists. Or do they? Theatre spaces seemed conspicuously absent from my students' dreams of theatre creation, so I began to think carefully about the link between dramaturgy, dreams, and the spaces of theatre creation. After all, I wanted to find a way to realise my students' dreams.

Dream Work, Thinking, and Theatrical Form

In considering the relationship between dreams and theatre, the most appropriate linkage, by way of dramaturgy, is thought. That is, a dream conceived of as a form of thought, or as Sigmund Freud said

dreams are nothing other than a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the dream-work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature.²

Therefore the proper analysis of dreams does not consist in penetrating from the manifest content to its 'hidden kernel', to the latent dream-thoughts; it consists in the answer to the question: why have the latent dream-thoughts assumed such a form, why were they transposed into the form of a dream? Perhaps then this might be applied to the theatre, given the similar potential for both the dream and theatre to be a space and time of speculation, in which we may be permitted to explore our desires and fears, our conflicts and our pleasures. I think it can be said that the theatre is a particular form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of theatrical representation. But in terms of our experience of dreams or, as I would like to suggest, theatre, two questions arise: first, as a particular way of thinking, why has theatre taken on certain forms – a proscenium arch or a five-act structure, for example. Why is the 'essence' in the 'work' or form of the dream and not as we might expect in its content?

² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Harmondsworth, 1977) 650.

Jean-François Lyotard's conception of the "theatrical-representational apparatus,"³ can offer a convincing response to this question because he uses a theatrical paradigm in order to advance the concept of thinking as "work" which happens in not only cognitive but also spatial and temporal terms, and in such a way that draws a useful parallel to Freud's 'dream work'. The implications of thinking as an act of work are significant here to a reconsideration of theatrical form, and how site-specific dramaturgical practices may open up a unique relationship between theatrical-representation and the real. As Lyotard's theatrical-representational apparatus is primarily concerned with its effects on the spectator, conceivably the 'dream-work' of the theatre might be shared by spectator and practitioner alike as a kind of spectre of the real, haunting the event of performance.

Lyotard's Theatrical-Representational Apparatus

Lyotard conceived the theatrical-representational apparatus by way of the visual arts when he compares representation in theatre to the perspectival painting of the *costruzione legittima* from the Italian Renaissance. In this analogy, the theatre consists of three closed spaces linked together: the support, the image or the stage, and the viewer. In painting, these would correspond to the surface and technology of painting (the medium), the image, and the position prescribed for the viewer by the vanishing point of perspectival construction. In the theatre itself, the three spaces are respectively the backstage apparatus (wings and machinery, etc.), the stage, and the auditorium. These three closed spaces locate themselves in opposition to a fourth, open, one -- the space of the real, of the world outside the theatre. In this structure there are three limits or divisions: stage from backstage, stage from auditorium, and theatre from world. Lyotard calls this proscenium stage space "a *dispositif*, or 'set-up'."⁴

Lyotard is not concerned with issues of falsity in this set-up, rather he questions the potential of performance to subvert the discursive structure of the theatrical-representational apparatus, acknowledging the seductive nature of discursive meaning. This distinguishes him from radical dramatists like Brecht for whom the above apparatus provided the means for ideological critique. For Brecht it was enough to work within an apparatus in which the limit between stage (performers) and auditorium (spectators) is breached so that the spectators may ask 'who speaks?' or where the limit between stage and backstage is breached to show the apparatus by which the image is constructed. Brecht's practice corresponds to the classical moves of an ideological critique by which the spectators and the image are referred back to the mechanism by which they are constructed and positioned. In each case, however, the limit that separates the 'de-realized' space of the theatrical apparatus from the outside is preserved. Lyotard claims that contemporary capitalism has developed to the point where it can itself make profit from breaching the limits inside the theatrical-representational apparatus.

Lyotard's critique of theatrical representation is significant for spectatorship of site specific theatre because it demonstrates the limits of representational concepts and shows how even when a radical ideology like Brecht's is applied to this apparatus, the prevailing conceptual *dispositif* remains unchallenged. Lyotard likens this unchallenged limit of political space to that of the walls of a museum on art: "the putting aside of effects and the privileging of concepts as extraterritorial; the setting aside of intensities and their weakening by means of their staging."⁵

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1983) 255; my translation.

⁴ Bill Readings, *Reading Lyotard* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) 93-94.

⁵ Lyotard, *Des Dispositifs pulsionnels* 291.

I would like to extend this criticism to the theatre and suggest that the design of purpose-built theatre spaces falls prey to a particular conceptual *dispositif*. The prevailing forms of performance space at the University of Regina, for example, are a proscenium arched main stage, and an adaptable (yet entirely predictable) black box studio space; both are becoming tedious from the practitioner's point of view, but what is worse is the effect these spaces have on the spectators. Essentially we are presented with a static form which we then fill with different kinds of content. As the established theatres in our communities become vessels for the universal exchange of plays featuring the latest new content, they then become yet another outlet for the kind of commensurate exchange of all manner of goods and services which we have become accustomed to in shopping malls or on the Internet. As the content of one 'site', say a regional theatre such as Regina's Globe Theatre, is commensurately exchanged with another, say Edmonton's Citadel, the value of each is based primarily on the ease of this exchange.

As with other cities in peripheral regions of Canada, in Regina there are many examples of the staging of Lyotard's *dispositif* in a variety of cultural industries and arenas. The main highways in and out of town are cluttered with big-box stores and fast food restaurants that 'stage' an experience of entertainment, value or appeal in their products in such a way that is identical whether you are in the south-end Regina outlet or the one in North Battleford. The identical merchandise and lay out seem to be one way commensurate exchange is guaranteed from franchise to franchise; as if a guarantee of value were assured if the layout of one fast food restaurant in one city were identical to another 3,000 kilometres away. Indeed, this reality essentially suggests that whenever customers purchase their product in these businesses, they want it to be the same wherever they go. The content differs from industry to industry, but the representational forms of 'staging' good quality experiences are remarkably similar whether we are referring to hamburgers, jeans, video, or even a touring production of Beauty and the Beast. Concerning this last example, the Disney production came to Regina's Saskatchewan Centre for Performing Arts in the Summer of 2000, and the tour stage manager commented to a friend of mine that when inside the theatre, she never knew if she were in Regina, Calgary, or Edmonton because each city has a virtually identical Centennial centre for performing arts.

Regina has a population of nearly 300,000 people, but only two professional theatre companies, the Globe and Curtain Razors. Of the two, only the Globe has a regular season and its own theatre. Curtain Razors works on a project-to-project basis, and performs in a variety of auditoria around the city, including at the Globe's space. The former is often quite conventional in its programming, attempting to appeal to a conservative group of subscribers; the latter is more often radical in content, so as to offer an alternative. While living in Regina I did my best to encourage and support the work of both companies. My students, on the other hand, had a more negative perspective on these companies and their work; this was primarily to do with the fact that each company rarely hired students from our program. In fact, based upon a couple of examples, it appeared to most of our student actors that it was only possible to be hired at the Globe if you first moved to another city, were cast in a couple of productions there, and then came back. I wanted to help my students to be able to create their own work, in their own city, and in time I hoped they could work independently of either the Globe or Curtain Razors. In addition, I had students who were Education majors, who wanted to teach theatre in schools, and I knew if they stayed in Saskatchewan it was likely they would be teaching theatre in a rural location without a purpose-built theatre.

**A Trinity of Creation for Site-Specific Theatre:
The Host / The Ghost / The Witness**

Drawing from personal experience and my growing understanding of Regina as a context for professional theatre and the work of my students, I developed a term assignment for my production dramaturgy class based on the following criteria. First, I wanted the class to explore the creative possibilities of dramaturgy; as an inspiration, I wanted them to explore a resource – something material, tangible, and simple; yet, I felt it should be something that haunted them, even scared them a bit, or perhaps in some way it held a mystery for them. Second, while the work of dramaturges is often multi-faceted, and therefore difficult to define, conventionally dramaturgical training has involved the research and presentation of historical materials to assist the actors, director, and designer in the development of a production. With this project, students were given the chance to move beyond standard approaches to dramaturgical practice in a couple of significant ways: Students were to research and develop material that they would, themselves, see through to performance. The performance would be written, directed and performed collectively by the students. I wanted to encourage them to be theatre artists, and avoid the pitfalls of a 'dramaturgy ghetto'. I wanted to encourage them to be theatre artists. Given my concerns about the relationship of theatrical-representation to theatrical space, I asked my students to research and prepare a performance based on a specific historical building in the city. In this case, their work would be devoted to a real, particular site of Regina's history, not just a fictional environment existing only on the stage of a theatre. I wanted them to consider the political and aesthetic implications of moving theatre practices out of theatres and into real, inhabited spaces in the community. Through this process, students were encouraged to consider broad questions concerning the place of theatre in relation to the community's history, architecture, urban geography – and these elements alongside their own collective and personal experience of place.

Reflecting on the parallels that had been drawn between my rooming house experience and haunting, I decided the resource should be a building in the city that is reputedly haunted. The choice of a haunted building as a resource for theatre creation seemed to effectively fulfil all of the criteria needed; it especially balanced the need for something straight-forward – a building, in a sense an object that in essence we could all agree was just that, a building – and yet it's haunting withheld a certain mystery.

Above all, this assignment would also move the class and myself toward a better understanding of the role played by dramaturgy in site-specific theatre. It has been my experience in creating theatre in site-specific locations that perhaps the greatest benefit of the work is how it engages with a particular place that exists as an entirely independent entity to its use for theatre. This is not to say that by simply bringing the tools of theatrical representation out of the theatre and into another location we can be entirely free of the workings of the theatrical-representational apparatus, rather the real elements of the site work alongside the imposed elements. Here real objects may act as a kind of indeterminate excess to representation, and thereby de-centre our experience of both the real and the representational elements in the site.

In his work with Welsh Theatre company Brith Gof, designer Cliff McLucas began to characterize his site specific theatre designs in terms of a "trinity of creation" wherein "The Place (the Host), The Performance (The Ghost) and The Public (The Witness) create a composite that becomes what is known as the 'work'."⁶ I borrowed and adapted McLucas's form of theatre creation and, with some alterations, used it as the model followed by my students. The dramaturgy assignment, entitled *The Host / The Ghost / The Witness*, had its final presentations during the week of April 2 to April 8,

⁶ Cliff McLucas, *Brith Gof – Large Scale Site-Specific Theatre Works, An Illustrated Lecture* (Cardiff: Brith Gof, 1993) 2.

2000, consisting of four performances which occurred around Regina, each offering an animation of a particular haunted, historical site in the city.

The four sites chosen included the Assiniboia Club, the city's oldest gentleman's club, part of which was recently converted into Danbry's, an up-scale restaurant. This location was reputedly haunted by a young woman named Charity, who was believed to be a prostitute murdered in one of the private bedrooms of the club in the 1940s. The research on this site was impressive, including 16 interviews with former members and employees of the club, current employees of the restaurant; intriguing archival information that clearly indicated 'an incident' involving a club member and this individual's subsequent dismissal; as well as a spiritual mapping done by a local specialist in this area of paranormal cartography. A downtown tavern called Bart's on Broad featured furnishings bought at auction that had come from saloons across the North American west. This project animated the various stories of hauntings that emanated from a bar and booth with bullet holes from a famous shoot out involving Billy The Kid, a stain-glass window from the unhappy home of newlywed who committed suicide, and a ceiling fan system from a bank in Cleveland that featured one of the bloodiest robbery shootouts in that city's history. Here was a collage of performed animations that cleverly tied all of these objects and their hauntings of misfortune into the performances of several lost souls who had finally found refuge in this tavern.

The dome of the Provincial Legislature Building was also a site. Completed in 1913, this magnificent structure was open to the public because a viewing deck at its top featured the best view in southern Saskatchewan. Unfortunately this dome was closed to the public in 1967 because in that year Lawrence Hall, a local fire fighter suffering from schizophrenia, threw himself off the top of the dome and died. Curiously, the provincial records indicate that Hall had thrown himself off the building twice previously that year, and the site was finally closed to public access in part because of the failure of the Legislature staff to prevent his death. In keeping with the multiple personalities of his mental illness, legend has it that Hall was a master of disguises. In addition to the folklore surrounding Lawrence Hall, the students who worked in this site were also blessed with wonderful archive of stories. Inside the dome, traversing its inner wall was a staircase along which had been scratched, stencilled, and inked the most interesting graffiti – hundreds of passages, poems, stories, and signatures – written along the wall along the 10-storey climb toward the lookout deck at the top of the dome.

The last site chosen was 1800 College Avenue, which in the Spring of 2000 was the home of Megellan's Global Coffee House. This 'troubled house' of Regina's history became the focus of research and further performances that extended beyond this dramaturgy class because its owners were willing supporters of this work, and the heritage of this house – haunted and otherwise – was important to many in the community.

1800 Confessions Avenue

The production entitled *1800 Confessions Avenue* arose in part out of *The Host / The Ghost / The Witness* site-specific dramaturgy project,⁷ and in part out of a directed studies class in site-specific performance wherein the work of three students further developed the historical research of the site and the techniques used in the performances of *1800 Confessions Avenue*.⁸ In the following

⁷ Four students developed a performance at 1800 College Avenue as part of *The Host / The Ghost / The Witness* assignment, and they were: Jill Wilton, Glenda Whalen, Tom Swanson, and Holly McLean.

⁸ The three students in this class were David McBride, Derek Porter, and Glenda Whalen.

analysis, I want to establish how this method of developing theatre and the resulting relationships between the host, the ghost, and the witness subvert the conventional *dispositif* of the theatrical-representational apparatus. In their relationship to the host, the referent, dramaturgical strategies call into question the customary theological quality of theatrical-representation. The use of found objects on site in a fabricated way is seen to emphasize their indeterminate qualities as real objects, thereby subverting theatrical-representation wherein the real is reduced to the representation of an absent entity for the viewing subject. However, if the real is no longer absent, but is in part made present through the dramaturgical strategies of site-specific theatre, it is important to be clear about the nature of the real, and its relationship to reality.

Lacan's writing on "the Real" and "reality" and the differentiations that he makes between these terms are a useful starting-point in the following attempt to articulate the relationship between Lacan's 'Real', its relationship to the reality of a particular site, and how it may haunt the theatrical-representation apparatus of site-specific performance. For Lacan, reality is socially constructed and it is reality which is inculcated through the operation of language. Our experience of the world, what we are, what we see, is prescribed by language and its structures. In *Seminar 1*, Lacan describes language "as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real."⁹ Language – in this case, theatrical-representation – is the regulatory system by which reality is comprehended and understood; for Lacan this system is the symbolic structure.

Lacan appears to locate an order ("the totality of the real"¹⁰) prior to or beyond the system(s) of language and its "network"; a real which avoids the dynamics through which reality is constructed. In an earlier section in *Seminar 1* he attempts the following definition of this version of the real: "the real, or what is perceived as such, is what resists symbolisation absolutely."¹¹ The Real, although beyond representation, is revealed to haunt representation. In fact, as Fred Botting convincingly argues in his article "Culture, Subjectivity and the Real; Or, Psychoanalysis Reading Postmodernity," the real is the "the site of loss and anxiety, associated with mourning and psychosis."¹² The Real is thus something which is known by the subject but lost in the process of signifying subjectivity. This loss is felt by the subject and can be experienced as a kind of trauma.

If we turn to Lacan's idea of reality we find that subjectivity (identity) is formed from a contradiction within the language system. The subject is constructed as a subject through the operation of language: through the recognition of an Other that embodies and instils difference as the locus of any signifying system. The subject is thus formed from an attempt (in language) to shore up the symbolic framework (constructed through difference) and yet is haunted by the loss of unity that occurred before such frameworks came into operation. This loss is felt, for example, through the loss of the Other, as in the absence of a loved one, a loved object, or as I would like to suggest: a loved home. The trauma of this loss necessitates a symbolic response, a ritual of mourning or of marking this displacement. This ritual is itself a signifying process or activity that attempts to recover the signifying system, by which subjectivity is constructed, now destabilized by such loss. It is the sense of this loss that opens out a space or a void in reality – a space of haunting – in its network of signification, which acts to undo any attempt of closure, of destabilizing any action that

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 262.

¹⁰ Lacan 66.

¹¹ Lacan 68.

¹² Fred Botting, "Culture, Subjectivity and the Real; Or, Psychoanalysis Reading Postmodernity," *Theorizing Culture: An Interdisciplinary Critique After Postmodernism*, eds. Barbara Adam and Stuart Allan (London: UCL Press, 1995) 89.

attempts to secure the operation of signification.

In short Lacan indicates that the real cannot be mastered or fully understood because it always escapes symbolization. The real is the point of origin that is forever lost and trauma marks this loss. In other words, the unsymbolizable excess of the real disturbs the imaginary and symbolic structures of the act of mourning, or equally so the theatrical-representational apparatus in theatre. The real is felt in an attempt to recover from that loss, to fill the hole left by the encounter with it. The real is felt at the very point where theatrical-representation attempts to secure the foundations where reality can be marked out, where the exterior – the materiality of things – is held in place for the subject.

The Host (the resource)

The house at 1800 College Avenue was built by John McKillop in the spring and summer of 1911, and was completed in September of that year for just under \$12,000. The performances of *1800 Confessions Avenue* took place in the first week of September, 2000; coincidentally in a week when the building had just changed hands from its 21st to its 22nd owner.

A three-storey structure built in an Arts and Crafts style, 1800 College Avenue offers many important opportunities as a resource and host site. First, the house has certain mnemonic elements as both a private and public dwelling. As a private home, the McKillop family, who built the house and were its first owners, were forced to sell it after about 11 years due to financial troubles. After a relatively stable tenancy of about 45 years wherein the Sneath family resided there, the house was eventually sold to a photographer as a site for business, and then again 10 more times in the next 25 years or so. It is well known that Rose McKillop, the wife of the original owner, was traumatized by the event of losing her beloved house. The story of how she ran from the house's back door, clutching her favourite vase in one hand and a child in the other, while the creditors from the North American Life Assurance Company were coming through the front door – to repossess the property – is often repeated by those fascinated by the history of the house. From the time the McKillops lost the house, Rose apparently spent the rest of her life yearning to live there again. In the last few years of her life, she would often pack up her things from her room in her seniors' residence and to be found later in the day out front of "her stone house"¹³ and ready to move back in. Joseph Thauberger, the first owner to use the building as a business bought 1800 College Avenue in the spring of 1974. Rose McKillop died in April of that year. Thauberger was the first occupant to say that the house was haunted. Over the course of the next 26 years, 1800 College Avenue has had many occupants, all running businesses, and all with memories of ghosts. Usually the stories revolve around the image of an elderly woman or a woman's voice heard singing in the stairwell; sometimes, however, there are accounts of men arguing in the dining room, or of a cold, shadowy presence in the room on the main floor which was once an office.

The house has certain architectural elements. Despite its multiple occupancy, the house's hardwood trim -- its french doors, its fireplace facades, its beams, windows and stairwell -- has remained in remarkably good condition on the first floor. The second and third floors, on the other hand, have been recklessly gutted, altered, and for the most part left bare by the current owner. This open space, replete with scars, cavities, and traces of previous occupants, offered many opportunities for narrative and performance. The production of *1800 Confessions Avenue* was able to make good use of the various stories, traces, and scars of memory existing in a site with a

¹³ Glenda Whalen, *Our House*, report prepared for *Theatre 250 – The Host / The Ghost / The Witness – Collective Dramaturgy Assignment* (University of Regina, 2000) 32.

history of 'particular' uses other than theatre. For example, on the second floor, two of the demolished walls were reconstructed using a 2" X 2" wooden frame and a semi-transparent polyurethane covering; the result was two wall spaces within which certain characters could reside or use as a space of interaction. These two wall spaces in particular became a dwelling space for an adolescent boy character created by David McBride.

Second, as an unconventional theatre space, the spectators arrived at *1800 Confessions Avenue* with open expectations of the event they were about to experience. The spectators still bring with them expectations, the "theatre of the mind" as McLucas calls it, "a distillation of all the previous or learned contracts of each spectator's experience of theatre."¹⁴ But the theatre of the mind tends to be less dominant in an atmosphere where there are less reminders of a conventional theatre experience. For example, spectators enter a house/cafe not a theatre and there are none of the conventional seating, lighting or other uses of conventional stagecraft in evidence. Perhaps such a situation can promote an open-mindedness on the part of the spectator, and a willingness to engage in a live event in a more active manner than is considered the norm. Perhaps a new and extended contract between the spectator and the event is possible.

Third, real architectural sites such as 1800 College Avenue encourage the practitioner to think and create in three and four dimensions. This has major implications for the concepts and practices at the heart of theatre. It may re-write or problematize the nature of the relationships between all components of the event: between spectator as individual and spectators as a group, between spectator as individual and performer, between spectator as a group and performer, between performer and performer, between performer and architecture, and so on. In *1800 Confessions Avenue* the spectators began the performance seated in the main room of the coffee house that was once the living room and dining room, but they were soon required to follow the event into other rooms, upstairs, and into the houses various recesses – big and small. In this respect the spectators share in the performers' exploration and discovery of the host in the most tactile of ways, through their sense of smell and touch as well as through their sense of sight and sound. Moreover, in such an environment, performer and spectator alike discover that beyond the elements of gesture and kinesics, most often employed by the physical movement of conventional theatre practice, here performance material could be generated entirely from proxemics – the distances between people – and haptics, the touch of self and others.

The Ghost (the scores, the narratives)

A wide range of narrative was created and culled for *1800 Confessions Avenue*. Beginning with historical facts about the building and its many inhabitants, we devised narratives, ballads, and physical scores around the archetype of 'family' that existed in the house. Much of this work began with a basis in research, but soon took on fabrication based more in the personal experiences of the performers than on found history. For example, the performance began with a chorus of confessional texts ranging from straight information about the house and its inhabitants to fantastical deeds, activities, and personal information that could not possibly have any direct relation to the house.

The fantastical departure from historical fact was for two reasons: First, the collective of performers assembled for this second phase of work at this site felt that the first phase had already covered the most interesting historical information on the house.¹⁵ Second, some of the relatives of the

¹⁴ McLucas, 3.

¹⁵ The performers in this production were Dionne Fisher, Amber Fletcher, Blayne George, Tim

family who had lived for the longest time in the house were apprehensive about the use of personal information in our performance. The result was, as I described in the performance's program, an attempt to narrate and explore an experience which might better be described as myth, shadow or a ghost of the house's factual history. In exploring 1800 College Avenue, the ensemble of performers become

mediums to experiences that are embedded in the house. While some of these experiences are set in the house's actual history, more often they are a part of a different truth which we feel the house must confess. As 1800 College Avenue becomes *1800 Confession Avenue*, the audience may become witnesses to a history more deeply embedded in the psyche -- to the mythical, the personal, the imaginary. As each corridor, door, window, and room becomes a stage for confession, a safe passage back to the everyday may no longer be assured.¹⁶

Many existing text fragments were selected as shadows of factual material found in the research and to animate physical marks, scars, or other attributes in the site. We began to see our animations and layering of texts as contributing to the already dense layers of palimpsest existing in the house, especially on the second floor. For example, not long after the house had become a commercial residence, separate washrooms for men and women had been created around the plumbing and existing washroom for the master bedroom, while the main washroom lay dormant, and by the time we were working in the house, it was partially gutted. In this partially destroyed room we found several broken pieces of mirror. Blayne George, who had been developing texts reflecting various patriarchs and father figures who had lived in the house, developed the following from a short story series by David Foster Wallace, entitled *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*:

My mother could be cold and rejecting, rebuffing any attempts as a small child on my part to receive reassurance and nurture, sometimes sending me alone to the bathroom, and effusing to let me out for some rigidly specified period while my twin sister continued to enjoy unconfined freedom of movement about the house and also continued to receive warmth and maternal affection. Then, after the rigid period of confinement was over – I mean to say the precise instant my [f.f.] *time-out* was completed – Mummy would open the door and embrace me warmly and blot my tears away with her sleeve and would claim that all was forgiven, all was well again. This flood of reassurance and nurture would once again seduce me into [f.f.] *trusting* her and revering her and ceding emotional power to her, rendering me vulnerable to devastation all over again whenever she might choose to turn cold and look at me as if I were some sort of laboratory specimen she'd never seen before. This cycle played itself out repeatedly throughout our childhood relation, I am afraid.¹⁷

In this sequence, Blayne's character, George, undresses and shaves as he looks at himself in the many broken pieces of mirror that now adorn the walls of this dysfunctional bathroom. As Wallace's text becomes a palimpsest etched over the remains of the bathroom once owned by George Sneath theatrical-representation is experienced as a material that is always mutating and reconfiguring, where a grounded meaning becomes impossible.

Hoffner, Trenna Keating, David McBride, and Carmen Tait.

¹⁶ Andrew Houston, *1800 Confessions Avenue*, "Director's Notes" from program (University of Regina, 2000).

¹⁷ David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Harper's Magazine* (October 1998) 51.

In the weave of text, be it fact, confession, narrative, history, or other, a dramaturgy that can best come to terms with the *event* of these texts is necessary. Eugenio Barba, whose work exploring the intertextual landscape of theatre anthropology has gained international attention, has best defined dramaturgy for our purposes here. He explains:

The word text, before referring to a written or spoken, printed, or manuscripted text, meant 'a weaving together'. In this sense, there is no performance which does not have 'text'. That which concerns the text (the weave) of the performance can be defined as 'dramaturgy', that is *drama-ergon*, the 'work of the actions' in the performance.¹⁸

In the 'work of the actions' we find a representational excess to the theatrical-representational apparatus outlined above. In order to best understand how action works as representational excess, again it is Barba, who has made a considerable study of the various levels of conscious and unconscious energy generated in live performance, to whom we can turn. His work has been developed using acting styles from around the world, and he offers significant insight into how action and performer-energy can have *synesthetic* effects upon the spectator. *Synesthesia* refers to a sensation felt in one part of the body when another part is stimulated. Barba explains 'synesthesia' in live performance the following way:

those levels of communication between actors and audience which defy signification: the way in which an actor's body tension affects the audience; the 'feel' of a particular scene; or the actor's longed-for declaration, 'It's a good house tonight', by which s/he means there is a special sense of communion between the performers and their audience.

The synesthetic level of communication depends little upon the actor's score, which is the world of the role or the represented other. This is the semiotic universe. The synesthetic is rooted squarely in the actor's realm, in how s/he does what s/he does.¹⁹

Perhaps the spectre of the real emerges in performance when communication between the actors and spectators defies signification; moving, as Barba suggests, to a level of contact beyond the realm of semiotics. Performativity of response on the part of the spectators occurs through their encounter with the effects generated by synesthetics in a performance text. An understanding of dramaturgy here, then, becomes a process of examining how the effects of synesthetic action are tangible in the perception of the spectators. It is the corporeality of these effects which gives the spectators' an experience of material specificity; the pragmatic quality of which renders partial the abstract analysis of semiotics.

Barba's concept of dramaturgy illuminates two processes crucial to the understanding of how actions work in site specific theatre. First, the weave of actions which makes up the performance text opens up associative links between each action (as signifier), its (signified) meaning, and those of other actions and their meanings; these associative openings offer a plurality of readings for the spectator; problematizing the reduction of their associative 'weave' to a linear concept of meaning.

¹⁸ (Eugenio Barba, The Secret Art of the Performer – A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, eds. Barba and Nicola Savarese (London: Routledge, 1991) 68.

¹⁹ Barba, 312.

The arbitrary associations here are the focus of semiotic analysis, the examination of equivalence between various signs. To this, however, is added the synesthetic effect of these signs -- because they are actions.

Second, as the synesthetic effect of each action in the 'weave' corporeally involves the spectators, what the performance text 'does' to the spectators becomes increasingly important. The co-presence of these two processes in the performance text facilitates meaning at a further conceptual level because the epistemological condition of the first is 'woven' into the ontological condition of the second. Where epistemology encounters ontology in spectatorship, and meaning becomes more a concern of what effect a text has upon the spectator, the process of making meaning becomes more a practice -- an action in itself -- on the part of the spectator. The relation between the realm of language and the realm of being is where site-specific theatre may negotiate a gap in semiotics, which is found in the arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified. By inserting the synesthetic activity of a 'real historical' spectator between a text and its epistemological content, there is an attempt to circumvent the threatened split between, on the one hand, the structure of consciousness (i.e. the conceptual forms in which a consciousness appropriates the world for meaning) and, on the other, history (the material content of a text which may disturb such formal semiotic structures).

Early in the performance, after the performers have offered their confessions -- which essentially has established a sense of their inability to fully inhabit the text of this house -- the audience are witness to a sequence of monologues, creating the different perspectives of the 'family' they are about to follow throughout this house. David McBride performs the 'son', and while sitting at one of the coffee house tables, placed in the dining room, he recounts a memory of a dinner long ago. He has burnt himself on one of the dishes and says:

It burns my hand, and I yank it back and then sit there holding my hand out for my mom to look at. She's concerned. But my dad, he's watching the whole thing while he's eating his calamari, and he's almost choking with laughter at me touching the skillet. There's this thing with his lip when he laughs. My sister always puts her hands over her ears. 'Boy, that's a whole little character study of you right there,' he laughs. Big red loud laugh. My hand is red, also.²⁰

Some of the audience have been sitting at the table, and in this orientation to David's character, they have 'become' his family. Other spectators have had to move toward the dining room and this table; they must jockey for position around this event. The dining room's proximity to the kitchen, in the next room, means the smell of (the coffee house's) food permeates this scene and the room is hot from the large ovens just beyond the door. The synesthetic effect of the scene is a curious paradox between the nurturing smell of the kitchen's cooking and the angry heat of the action.

The Witness (the relationality of the real)

There can be no plenitude to being in performance, as either origin or finality, since that plenitude is always fissured by something else. In the work of the spectators (witnesses), in the way the performance effects them, there is a *différance* which flaws the identity performed, and thereby dispells any possibility of a complete being of illusion in performance.²¹

²⁰ Wallace 41.

²¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 149.

In the way the dramaturgical strategies of site-specific theatre challenge the *dispositif* of theatrical representation, there is a radical demand placed on the spectator. In that these dramaturgical strategies are open to the indeterminacy of specific qualities of the site and its animation, there is a demand for the spectator to be open to this event, to be present as a witness. Tim Etchells describes the role of the witness the following way: “to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an on-looker.”²² As the dramaturgical strategies of *1800 Confessions Avenue* construct a theatrical-representational apparatus, and thereby signify an identity in relationship to 1800 College Avenue – the *object* of the performance – there is an awareness that this ‘object’ is not a stable entity; that its plentitude in performance is fissured by a reliance on something which extends outside of itself, a ‘surplus’ to representation. In *1800 Confessions Avenue*, the dramaturgical weave of the host and the ghost opens up the effects of this surplus, as a ‘substance’ which resists the signification of identity, appropriation through history, technology or other such mastery.

This substance of the site which resists mastery can be equated with Lacan's *objet petit a*, an object cause of desire, described in the program the following way:

What happens when a house becomes an object of representation for theatre? As a site which we have utilized for the creation of theatre, I think 1800 College Avenue has evolved into two realities. The first is based on its substantial, matter-of-fact existence; the second has to do with our gaze. This view is puzzled by our desires and anxieties. Indeed, this second ‘reality’ is posited by our feelings and experiences of the place; although, it may seem like a pure illusion, it is capable of triggering a whole chain of consequences that materially effect our experience of the first. *1800 Confessions Avenue* is the dramatized result of our perception of these effects.²³

In September, 200 the first floor of 1800 College Avenue had remained relatively the same to what it was when the house belonged to a family. Magellan’s Global Coffee House existed mainly on this floor for its comfortable atmosphere. The second floor was where the washrooms were located, but otherwise it was mostly vacant, and scared by failed renovation attempts. Perhaps the most common paranormal activity, reported by the staff of the coffee house, was the sound of a woman’s voice singing at the top of the stairs. Sometimes, several times a week, the voice would be heard. Those new to the experience would rush to the top of the stairs, only to find silence and the gutted remains of the second floor. Perhaps the ghostly voice is the substance of Rose McKillop, and what we encounter when we try to find her has to do with our relationship to her memory. According the Lacan, her haunting presence marks the *objet petit a* of 1800 College Avenue, when he says:

We search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency, that is, because it is just a positivisation of a void – of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier.²⁴

²² Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 18.

²³ Houston, “Director’s Notes” from program.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan as quoted in Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) xiv.

In the performance, Amber Fletcher musically adapted Robert Louis Stevenson's *Home No More To Me* and sang it at the top of the stairs, and on the line "...the kind hearts, the true hearts, that loved the place of old"; in each performance I would always observe a spectator, as they had worked to get to the top of the stairs, looking as though they had attained something of themselves in what remained of this beloved 'place of old'.

The substance hunted like a ghost, which exists in excess to 1800 College Avenue – as it becomes the object of desire, and curiosity, sadness, and ultimately, theatrical-representation – engages the spectators in a process of 'work' because it poses a question which aims at the heart of subjectivity. At first glance, this may seem like a conventional philosophical problem: the witness-as-subject takes on board the question posed by the performance, and as such enacts this critical force of negativity upon the positively given self or, in other words, embodies the question. But, on the contrary, here we have a notion of subjectivity developed by Lacan, which is the exact opposite: the subject is not a question, it is an *answer*, the 'answer' of the real to the question asked by the big Other, the symbolic order or, in this case, the theatrical-representational apparatus. It is not the subject asking the question; the subject is the void of the impossibility of answering the question of the Other. The subject must work toward the answer of the question posed by the theatrical-representational apparatus because in a sense the question is unanswerable, yet the pursuit of the answer, the relationship created between the subject and the object of representation, which is the substance of this question, is subjectivity itself.

In demanding that the witness be the subject of a question posed by the theatrical-representational apparatus, the dramaturgical strategies of site-specific theatre aim at the innermost, intimate kernel of subjectivity called *das Ding* (the Thing) by Lacan. Lacan considered this 'substance' of subjectivity, this strange body in the subject's interior to be radically interior and yet at the same time to be already exterior; and to describe this phenomena, he coined a new word: *extime*. Slavoj Zizek places Lacan's 'extime' in a historical context when he says:

The real object of the question [posed to the subject] is what Plato, in the *Symposium*, called \geq through the mouth of Alcibiades \geq *agalma*, the hidden treasure, the essential object in the [the subject] which cannot be objectivated, dominated. (Zizek, 1989, p.180)

The Lacanian formula for this object is of course *objet petit a*, this point of real at the very heart of the subject which cannot be symbolized, which is produced as a residue, a remnant, a leftover of every signifying operation; a hard core embodying *jouissance*, enjoyment, and as such an object which simultaneously attracts and repels us; which *divides* our desire and thus provokes the subject to work toward a response. The subject exists only in so far as it experiences itself as some alien, positively given entity, and this experience, this *relationality* between the object of representation and the object within the subject is the effect of site-specific theatre. In the face of this paradoxical effect, of the divided desire stimulated by the dramaturgy, there is the potential for the subject-as-witness to develop an ethical form of relating, an integrity toward the real, and toward the essence of subjectivity.

Site versus Sight

Now, from a distance of a few years and several thousand kilometres, I am not sure if I believe in the ghost of Rose McKillop, but I certainly believe in the effects of my relationship with her, through the traces of her I found in her house. I will never forget the sensual qualities of my work in 1800 College Avenue: the light on the stairwell; the smells of the dust, the coffee, the wonderful food, and

the house's decay, as a window would be opened after a rain storm; the sounds of our confessions alongside the confessional creaks and groans of the architecture's age; and simply, the feel of the place. When I walk into most theatres I wonder why do we deny these sensual qualities of a live experience? Why is there such an emphasis on sitting in the dark and trying to see? When I think about this I am reminded of being in the dark myself, in a room in Regina, and that perhaps these other ways of experiencing the world are more traumatic and less controllable, and in this sense they are more real, which can be scary. I think we must face these 'felt' qualities in our dramaturgy, in our theatre, as we do in our dreams; echoing the passion of Tim Etchells, I think we should "play with what scares [us]."²⁵

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