Discussing theory-practice relationships in performance: a round-table discussion

John Bayliss, Tess DeQuincey, Deborah Pollard, David Pledger, Annette Tesoriero, Josephine Wilson

MODERATOR/EDITOR:

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On a hot day in January 2001, six artists (including Josephine Wilson on the blower from Perth) gathered at The Performance Space in Sydney to discuss the meaning and relevance of 'theory' to their work as arts practitioners. The event was organised by Performance Space director Fiona Winning, with costs and transcription services also provided by The Performance Space. Peter Eckersall moderated the discussion and edited the transcripts for this publication.

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Introductory comments

Peter Eckersall: In preparation for this discussion, I sent a letter outlining some possibilities for considering the relationship between theory and practice from the artist's point of view. I stated that we were interested in exploring these issues from individual perspectives and seeking input into discussion about theory/practice nexus, flows and divides among differing artistic communities, ecologies, in different times and places.

One of the things we might discuss is the question of what is theory? Is it a series of propositions, a set of ideas, a pathway, a procedure or operation? Some people talk about theory as a set of instructions. Others see theory as a way of guiding – but not determining – their work. Others still, talk about it as something that is only relevant in the reception of the work, in the reading of the work by audiences. So obviously there are many different definitions of what constitutes theory and what its relationship might be to practice.

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The idea of critical theory seems especially pertinent to this discussion. Critical theory – as opposed to other kinds of theory – has a history of integrating or reading social phenomena through philosophical frames. And critical theory is something that is often associated with a particular kind of study, a particular kind of philosophical or social discourse among university scholars. It is both used by artists and rejected by them. We might consider this and ask whether critical theory is something that theatre practice also engages with. It is often argued that critical theory might be an aid in understanding the world around us. If this is the case, theory then helps to locate our practice in critical contexts. Therefore, does critical theory help us to understand the world around us and make our practice more relevant?

Alternatively, should we try to escape theory altogether? Can we, or should we, move away from and strategically deny its existence? Does the weight of theory destroy the ‘aura’ of our work – the irony being that the notion of the aura itself has been defined and debated through critical theory discourse? Can we work without theory and what sort of work would that be?

Is performance practice a proving ground for theories? Scientists develop theories and then design some kind of experiment to elaborate and prove or disprove the theory. Is that what performance does as well? Or is there a different kind of relationship to theory, a different kind of theory at work?

These are some of the questions that we may consider here. They’re also propositions that are informed by my academic training, they might be contested by notions of practice or experiences of practice. We might begin discussion by asking each of you to present you own statements and/or responses to the experience of theory-practice relations. (Each participant was invited to prepare a short statement).

**Propositions**

**Annette Tesoriero:** Listening to all of that I thought, hum (tone of suspicion). We’re sitting here because we’re performers with various mixtures of exposure to critical theory and academic life. And I suppose from a personal experience working at the Performance Space for the past umpteen years that obviously you can’t help but be part of the discussion that goes on around the walls here and in the foyer after a performance. The critical theory or critical discussion that happens after performances amongst performers, amongst your peer group is an interesting way of getting access to the kind of current, the things that are happening artistically within an environment.

As a performer and as a voice person, I would have to say, there’s critical theory on music and on voice in certain areas and my use of that discussion
when making work or collaborating with other people is. I use it as a springboard. I look at ideas and I think, how do those ideas work for me, how do I feel about them? My most current work has been about the appropriation of the female singing voice in opera by drag queens. The Wayne Koestenbaum book, *The Queen’s Throat* offers a wealth of material, a treasure trove to plunder as far as looking at my identity as a singer and as a feminist and as a performer.

**Tess DeQuincey:** When you (PE) were speaking I felt very strongly, aah, the Voice of Academia. And I feel myself incredibly untutored in that respect. I don’t think it worries me particularly other than it’s an issue. The meeting is kind of inevitable at some stage. I feel that we all (artists and theoreticians).... It’s the act of negotiation. In effect negotiation in one sense is our theory. I guess that’s how I’m thinking of it at the moment.

In the last year and a half I’ve been thinking about environments. And I started to think a lot about the fact that in a performative situation, the environment is basically one of exchange. And then the issue is, what is the dialogue that’s taking place? In a sub-cultural sense you can operate through the body and certain ambiguities can be understood. The question is really how explicit is language in performance? And I find this really interesting... inevitably, there is a meeting with theory at some stage because of the explicitness of it. As a process of negotiation which I understand performance to be, as a practitioner, one inevitably is meeting the world and that is in itself also a theoretical relationship.

Another aspect to the discussion that I was just thinking of is the Japanese character for human being, *ningen*, (literally a combination of the characters for ’space/between’ and ’person/people’) the concept being that the individual is nothing alone but is a result of being together. Hence this thing about environment, dialogue and where does the language arise between us. And hence some of your questions I found very splitting whereas, for me, I don’t know if I experience a split other than I have to make sense of the world I exist in.

**Deborah Pollard:** What your questions first provoked in me was how was it that I came to be this rhetorical beast which I think I’ve turned into. And I look back on my practice right through from being a child in amateur theatre through to going to the University of Wollongong and doing a purely theatrically-based course with no connection whatsoever to ’academia’ – it was all practical. I think my first contact with theory came when I moved to Sydney, in a sense, because the scene in Sydney when you don’t fit into the mainstage/mainstream sort of ’look’ – even though that’s what you intended to enter into as a young person getting into theatre – you wanted to go to NIDA, you wanted to play Lady Macbeth and your emphasis on performing at
that stage was it’s a meaty part and I’ll look really good in that frock: to
being rejected by that world and having to... (seek alternatives).

It opens up your intelligence in a way, that rejection, because all of a
sudden you still want to be on stage, to be performing. You’re still operating
from that ego base at that point but you start to devise work, and after a while
of drawing on that purely character-based work which you’re used to from
your theatrical training, you get bored with that and you start to look around
and realise people are doing things that are examining things like the
relationship between the audience and the performer and the space, and the
character is no longer a fictitious character but is the self. And it’s at that
point that you start to engage with critical theory in a way which is doing the
same thing, discussing those same points.

And also... a trip to Japan and studying with Suzuki. All of a sudden I
was going, what the hell is this guy on about? All I wanted to do was stomp
and I’m not quite sure why I want to stomp. I’m sure it makes you a good
performer, you know. And all of a sudden he’s throwing things at you too
about the greater world.

So all of those elements result in you maturing as an artist. Whether that
maturing makes better work than you make when you’re very naive, I can’t
say. Sometimes I think the more entrenched we become in academic codes
and language and the language required for writing grant applications, we
start to believe that language and the rhetoric we throw at the funding bodies
and then we feed it back into our practice. The more we start to do that, the
more conservative our work becomes and it actually starts to follow another
fashion, and that’s the fashion of high academia and high art.

We then snub the daggier work that’s on stage that isn’t operating in any
theoretical way, shape or form. We talked about Robert Lepage earlier and I
found that work (The Far Side of the Moon) incredibly dagg because he was
creating characters on stage and talking to an imaginary person on the phone.
I kept on thinking, oh god! That’s just... [Shows] Get outta the 70s! Address
the audience and break that fourth wall! — which he seemed to be building
very quickly. I think it’s a very interesting thing. As I have tumbled down
my path of making work and looking for new ways to keep myself interested
in my practice — that’s what I’m battling against now — I suppose, I’ve turned
to critical theory as a point of inspiration and a point of extending the
concepts that I place on stage.

The last work I did with Salamanca in Tassie (Panopticon) very much
would fit the model you (PE) talk about. The initial idea came from
stumbling across Foucault and seeing this beautiful structure of a separate
prison system, the panopticon and going: gosh, that’s so theatrical, so my
theatrical brain steps into place and says, whoa, what does it actually mean to
build a structure like that and separate an audience. Then you start to get into all that stuff which we talk about in contemporary performance of disrupting the audience. All of a sudden they can no longer operate as a singular block which was the historical purpose of an audience coming together. They were a collective body and that’s why you go to the theatre and not watch television. So that in itself was interesting and to add to that was the historical context to place it in. I found myself in Tasmania and all they can refer to is their colonial history: that’s the fame … and Port Arthur aside from its contemporary tragedy is what they promote – its historical tragedy. So then I started to literally work with a critical theorist and an historian. That was to allow my conceptual base to extend beyond my own knowledge. I had to draw on the expertise of the academic world because I hadn’t taken a lifetime out to study the intricacies of the Port Arthur separate prison system whereas this wonderful historian (Hamish Maxwell Stewart) had. And the meeting point of us sitting around a table going ‘I want to present this work and discuss these issues’ and talking about the way that history is read, all of a sudden, took the work into an area that I couldn’t hope for.

But I’ll end by saying that I’m dead against putting straight theory on stage because I think it is boring, and the art-making process is to be able to take the theory and use it as the inspirational jumping point for your work.

**John Baylis**. When we decide to make a performance work, where do we get the ideas from? For me, that place where the ideas come from, is the theory of the work. It can be completely inchoate or highly articulated. Some people get it from academic literature, some people get it from other arts practice, from peers, from pop culture, from the press, whatever. I don’t make much distinction between these sources. Sometimes it’s more articulated, that’s all. Mirroring what Deb (Pollard) said, theory is the bunch of ideas you go in with, the stimulus for art-making. What comes out the other end is another thing again. I don’t like the kind of work that ‘proves’ the theory. That’s been the bane of a lot of visual arts practice in the last fifteen years or so. When that happens, theory hasn’t been a stimulus. It’s just been a grid, a kind of a paint-by-numbers.

I like reading stuff before I go into a project. When I started working with Urban Theatre Projects and doing site-based work, I read a lot of the new geographical speculation that’s happened over the past decade, postmodern geography. That was really interesting, really stimulating. I couldn’t point to anywhere in my work that I used it, but I found it very exciting to become aware of contemporary ways of articulating notions of ‘place’ and the like. Going back fifteen years or so to when the Sydney Front was starting, I was animated by Derrida’s ideas about presence. He was deconstructing the illusion of presence in literature, and that got me thinking about how we take ‘presence’ for granted in theatre. So much performance
training was aimed at enhancing the charisma of the live performer. No one seemed to find it problematic, not Artaud, not Grotowski. Brecht perhaps. I became interested in how a ‘riveting’ performance was constructed, and the ethical basis of such an artefact, and why an audience wants it. That small idea has kept me going ever since in different contexts. But the work that comes out the other end, if someone said, oh look, Derrida! I’d be very disappointed. I would hope the theoretical starting point has been deflected and refracted and comes out as something else, something new.

So my own feeling is that the best way to approach theory is as a dilettante. I like to read widely but not too deeply. If I read too deeply I know too much about it and I know the pros and cons and see all sides and it’s no use to me any more. I need one little stimulus. Often I’ll start a project and I’ll read a lot around the periphery, not the central bit. I’ll want to leave that part blank until I get into the rehearsal room so that it can form itself. I don’t know how you (PE) as a formal academic manage to be a creative artist as well, whether you have to wear different hats. In fact, I often find that this will happen within one rehearsal process. Six months out, I’ll be a serious researcher, three months out I’ll be panic-stricken and will grab ideas from anywhere, and one week out I’ll be the typical director/problem solver: do this, do that, doesn’t matter what it means, just do it! So your persona changes. If I were still the serious researcher one week out, the show just wouldn’t happen, or it would become so trapped in its theoretical construct that it wouldn’t have grown. And I trust that process too. I trust that when you’ve done that preparation, when you’re at that last moment trying to solve simple staging problems, you are actually solving more serious problems at the same time without having to think it through. You can trust that if you immersed yourself in the theory at the outset, your staging solution may also be a conceptual solution.

David Pledger: I’m not exactly sure what the word ‘theory’ means for me other than in the way I use it when I talk about what I do. I don’t know that it has a life for me outside of that. It sits in three areas for me. I use theory as an element of my practice. It sits alongside choreography, design, drama and new media as a performative mode. It sits inside…it can literally sit inside the body of a performance. I can use it as a research tool or a positioning tool or a framing device. As a performative mode, I am attracted by the aesthetics of the language of theory. I quite like when people talk theory. I think it’s kinda sexy. I don’t know what it means but there’s a whole language there that has its own rhythms, cadences… And underlying that is a whole multiplicity of associations of meanings which I then think exist as theatrical possibility.

I’ll be specific with an example of a production: Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy which Not Yet It’s Difficult made about five years ago. One of
the actors, Ollie [Ian] Olorenshaw, was an academic doing postgraduate study on the cultural reception of the play *Angels in America* all around the world. He was doing the cultural reception of the play in Australia. Ollie brought a draft of his essay to rehearsal. *Tiger Mountain* is a Peking Opera model, essentially a work of propaganda devised and used during the Cultural Revolution in China. What we wanted to try and do was look at ways of coding propaganda in the West using as a frame a work of propaganda from the East. And Ollie was interested in *Angels in America* as a coding device. So what we did was... Ollie read a piece of text and I did a lot of work with gestural choreography. I'd watch the way people operate and the way they use their hands and arms and legs and how they express themselves physically. I'd been building up this mode of gesture. We ended up building a sequence of gestural choreography around what Ollie had written. In other words, we were building a relationship between the aesthetics of the language of theory, the language that he had chosen to use, with the kind of physical vocabulary of Australian gay cultures mediated by Ollie as a gay person, within a discourse of the spectatorship and the readings of *Angels in America*. That was then mediated through gestural resonances with other members of the company and the kinetic coding of *Tiger Mountain*, a propaganda piece. We layered all these things around each other and it worked really well. If it doesn't work as a theatrical mechanism the other stuff doesn't make any sense at all. Unless it transcends all those other things I'm talking about, the theory as a kind of performative mode doesn't have any place. But in that case and in other performances that we've made, at times, it's been done successfully.

There's a second part to my answer in that I theorise my own research work. So if I do a research project, I do it very scientifically. Most of my research is (concerned with) training practices and the relationship between the body and the voice in Australian space. If you like, (I research) the performing body in Australian space. What I do is I set up a series of quite scientific hypotheses about the way bodies listen to each other, how voice mediates information through the space, and where that information comes from. Once I've done that, I basically try to make sense of it. I try and set up criteria for understanding things that had been unknowable or, if you like, finding better questions for the thing that really makes me go 'Wow! How does that happen?' And then I try and work it out. And as a result of that process I am writing a theory on 'The Performing Body in Australian Space'. I tend to use the raw data of the experiment, the scientific bit of it and then, around this, or in amongst it, I use, as an adjunct, theories of movement but I tend not to use performance theory. I don't usually read a lot of performance theory. I suppose because of my background. I'm very interested in dance and sport. So, for example, I'm really quite happy to be discursive about the way basketball zone defence was appropriated by Australian Rules football
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and to see the way that then transposed into a performance like the sports show we did a few years ago, how that transposes into the movement of the action through the space. Then at that point, looking at what happens within the performance, reducing the moment of the movement of each person in a physical performance ensemble. So it goes around in a circle. It’s not linear. It comes out of research then goes into performance and then comes back into research. And the theory is something that floats around in amongst it and I make sense of it. But I use things that are not necessarily related to what I’m doing. I don’t want to know what Grotowski did in ’67.... Those things don’t interest me. What interests me is how, you know, to kick a football. What is the biomechanical pathology of kicking a football or walking through space? They’re the things that get me going and the things I tend to concentrate on.

The last part in terms of discourse is really as an academic although I’m not an academic. Doing a Masters, I strung out a postgraduate investigation over about ten years and over that time there was a major shift in the way that academics saw art or cultural production as source material. I remember when I started in 1989 I was working largely on Chinese society and I tried to cite cinema, which I was also studying, as source material as a way of explaining a certain point. There was a lot of resistance to that when I started doing it. I think cultural studies hadn’t quite kicked-in in Australia at that stage. And then two years ago when I finished I was able to use my own company and my own productions of work overseas as case studies in order to investigate intercultural theatre practice. What was so great was that I was able to put my practice into this kind of objective, academic discourse, and look at it from that angle. It really assisted me in working out patterns of movement in my thinking and creative process. It gave me a lot of freedom in that respect.

Josephine Wilson: First of all I suppose my position is different to most of you because I don’t feel I have the depth of practice that you all have. I really see myself more as a writer, whatever that is. Or that’s what I would like to be and I have found myself going through a lot of change in what I see as the relationship between theory and practice. I came from quite a theoretical undergraduate course in the 1980s where critical theory was seen as very cutting edge. (Later), what I came to see as the failing was that critical theory failed to take into account its own truth status. That is, in some kind of utopian moment in my mid-twenties I thought it was all true – and true in many realms. What I did when I started working – I had a job in a history museum – when I had to write briefs for exhibitions and various things.... That was the way I understood the organisation of space and objects. the way I thought about it was not the way the museum thought
about it, was not the way anyone in exhibition and design thought about it. And really, I felt completely irrelevant and I couldn’t do anything.

And I found through a number of years working on and off in the museum and then kind of abandoning that, I found that in a way writing was the only way I could do anything. I don’t mean ‘effect’ things because I’ve given up on the idea that I can change things, it’s not a programmatic thing. I think now that theory, or a certain sort of theory, has become... or risks becoming a kind of grid like John said, or a kind of frozen thing like Deborah’s talked about, particularly since it becomes the accepted language of description to arts funding bodies and within certain kinds of criticism of theatre and writing about performance.

I think the problem is, having taught casually in universities in creative writing and among students working on performance, they really think that they can take these ideas that exist within say post-colonial theatre or whatever and produce a piece that becomes, as other people have said here, just an example of a pre-existing model. And I think that is in a way the definition of what propaganda is, to a degree that you have an idea of the effect upon the audience and you map backwards as to how you feel that you can make them think. I don’t think that performance or writing works like that and I know that I can’t work like that.

And yet I was in love with theory and that kind of academic thing. But I found myself increasingly less interested in those kind of ideas and more interested, for example, in history or in events that happened in the past. I think that the relationship of theory to practice has changed since a certain sort of theory has moved from the position of being, if you like, avant-garde to becoming mainstream. And the same thing can happen in performance or dance where a kind of approach or a theoretical shift can then become a frozen set of movements rather than a way of getting somewhere or a process to move through.

I liked what David said about understanding things that are unknowable. For me it’s absolutely essential. I can’t do something if I know what the ending is. To me, you have to be open to the process of writing or making work to actually enable the ending to be open or what the result will be because if you don’t, you fall into a real trap of just becoming an exemplar of something, something that’s already existing and work becomes dead in a way.

Discussion

Josephinia: One thing that I thought of when Deborah was speaking about the panopticon in the context of Tasmania, is that one of the problems with a certain sort of theory is that it tends to hierarchise styles or forms and make for the more radical work. But it seems to me that you can’t ever really say
that because you really need to know the context for the performance. A show like *Panopticon* was in a very specific context. I know the sort of Historical Society world of Tasmania, the kind of small museums filled with Mrs Smith's petticoats, etc. I just know that kind of world would be blown apart by the kind of show that Deborah has put on. That reception and the making of work is absolutely about context and audience and that radicalism or innovativeness flow from that, rather than from something inherently within the form.

**John:** Yes I'm very conscious of that in my work too. In fact, I don't like the idea of the programme note that tells the audience the theoretical viewpoint they're supposed to adopt.

**Josephine:** The 'Derrida' bit?

**John:** Yes. I want Derrida to seep in through their pores, not through the programme note. The performance itself has to be able to stand alone. If the theoretical idea is a good one then it's a manifestation of something that is already in the air. It's your responsibility as an artist to be able to sense that something: the theory just gives you a clue or helps you make it into focus. In the end, you've got to find a performance equivalent, and not rely on the theory to give your performance authority. That's why I think a good work should be accessible. It should have connected with the same source that gave the theory its power. If it has done that, then it should be readable to most. The work should not explain the ideas — that is patronising. The work should be the ideas, then it will be an engaging experience for the audience.

**Annette:** It brings in the whole notion of the visceral. We can create theatre with theory. We can say how much theory we are going put in it, how much of Derrida is going to be in the piece, how much of it we want people to go away with. But at the same time, no-one's going to go away with anything unless there is something visceral there. In fact it's not really going to be theatre — it's going to be an academic treatise. If there's not something visceral in there for people to actually feel ... And it gets back to this humanitarian notion of connecting with another human being and the audience being human and not just Derrida-heads. I think that's what John is talking about, you know getting that visceral thing so that people are connecting on an emotional and a visceral level.

**Deborah:** I agree that the nature of the audience and the environment in which you present the work influences the way you present the work. When I first moved to Tasmania I was quite arrogant or ignorant. I had reached a point in Sydney where I was creating what I thought was interesting work and I took that whole process, lock stock and barrel, down to Tasmania where there isn't that kind of literacy, that kind of practice at all. Basically there's two professional companies in Hobart and one was traditionally a
children's theatre company, the other's a puppet theatre company. Then they get imports from Sydney and Melbourne, usually MTC and STC and so that's the level of literacy in terms of performance that they have. My first work probably died in the arse in terms of the adult audience it was shown to. That was a piece influenced by Baudrillard and no-one had heard of Baudrillard. And no-one was interested in being confronted in the way I wanted. With Panopticon I realised my practice had shifted so much to accommodate a Tasmanian audience that when I started to bring in artists that I've always wanted to work with such as Denis Beaubois - whose practice is becoming more and more subtle by the hour - it was difficult to say to Denis, 'look I'm not dumbing down to this audience but you can't do what you're doing in Sydney. So yes, we can perhaps put them up on a surveillance screen but not for half an hour like you intend, it can only be for a minute.' [Laughs] It still has to be in the context of entertainment and we still have to frame it. Denis was very much against us literally putting in the historical framework to let the audience in on what we were talking about. He said it should be evident for them in the structure. I said, it is if you've read all the Foucault theory, but it's not going to be evident for these people. So we literally had to make it with an historical framework. It couldn't relate to what the hell the performance work was doing outside the historical...

Peter: Tess, what about your work in the desert? How do you negotiate those kinds of spaces in theoretical terms?

Tess: Well, I guess I'm thinking, what are we? One theorises all the time what one's doing. So one is trying to make sense of what one is doing. I probably have less of a relationship with utilising theory to kick something off. I tend to actually have to try to make sense of what I do (through movement), the words come afterwards. And basically the whole thing in the desert was a series of question marks. Backwards and forwards in time, not just the action but the imagination and response to history and everything that's going on around. So one is faced with a whole series of constructs which are enormous. At the same time, it's a question from my point of view of making sense of one's being. I know I'm simplifying things by saying that. I found it very interesting when people were talking about the sense of theory that sometimes locks into a grid and one is actually caught by it as much as they might be opposed to it. There is no Truth, I mean it's endless answers to all these questions.

Peter: I'm interested to ask you though because you've developed a system of training called Body Weather.

Tess: Well, I haven't ... I've inherited it and developed it further. I didn't coin it.

Peter: Is that a theory or a method or is it both?
Tess: I think probably it would be both.

Peter: I think you can reflect on a method theoretically. Imagine if you’re a person writing a manual or a method, you might well begin with a theoretical model or some kind of constraints. We constantly have discussions in our university department about what theory is. We have photographic technicians who argue that instruction booklets for cameras are theory. When they’re asked where the ‘theory’ in their courses is they say, that’s where the theory is — the students have to learn these books. Now that’s a kind of theory. It’s a series of instructions, a series of exercises that you engage with in order to achieve an outcome. So in that sense, it’s a method. Perhaps a kind of meta-theory is to then reflect on that series of instructions from a particular sort of perspective, a perspective that privileges it as a form of technology or we might read it politically or … that’s critical theory. For example, I’m interested in whether Body Weather is a method or a theory.

Tess: Well, I mean it’s clear there are ways of operating which take on a series of instructions which if one looks at the original practice in Japan has a very clear philosophy behind it. But the question is whether one needs to take that on or not. I don’t think one needs to at all. And that’s one of the interesting aspects to Body Weather. I think that it can provide sort of vistas into actually… where other things can step in there and there can be a whole other formulation which can explain the same situation. It poses questions and provides the possibility for multiple answers. And it’s actually the multiplicity of the answers in effect that’s interesting as opposed to the single answer, being the right or the wrong which is irrelevant. So it’s actually more an investigation of multiplicity.

John: I think that’s one of the attractions of the Suzuki Method too: people were able to do it without taking on board too much of the philosophy. I know there is an implicit philosophy there but you could actually ignore it and use Suzuki for your own purposes.

Josephine: Can I just interrupt, I’ve got to go and feed my baby… um. He’s awake now. I’m sorry to have to do this but I’ll just nip out. Is that OK, if I just say thanks very much and zip!

All: Bye, Josephine.

Annette: Reality impinging on art again. It’s really wonderful. That was a great thing to happen.

Deborah: Nigel Kellaway (who first taught Suzuki work in Sydney) had learnt when Suzuki wasn’t explaining any theoretical perspective on the work. So Nigel didn’t have…(that overview). When he taught us I had no idea what I was doing. I could just justify it by saying yeh, it kinda feels good at the end of it. And I was quite shocked when I went over there to actually hear how integrated the philosophy was to the movement. And it’s
almost like the philosophy is more important than the movement. As Suzuki says, you can come up with any series of exercises to address these issues. And so I think the two are ... you can’t learn one without the other, in a way.

John: Well... lots of people have. [Laughs] That’s another thing we should talk about – misunderstandings of theory, which can be just as useful. In fact, I practise misunderstanding a lot. I’ve never actually had the master/pupil relationship like you two: Deb, you’ve been in the presence of Suzuki; Tess, you’ve worked with Tanaka Min. Other friends have been with Pina Bausch. Mike Mullins was with Grotowski. I’ve been with no one: I got everything second-hand because I was scared such powerful master-figures would overwhelm me.

Deborah: Oh, they’re kittens.

John: Oh, OK but I’ve always avoided them because I like to get things second-hand and to misunderstand them a little bit so I don’t get loaded with this huge Philosophy ...

Annette: That’s why ... when you’re doing your research, you say, there’s that bit in the middle and you don’t want to go there.

John: So I don’t get to the centre. That’s right. No, misunderstanding theory, I think, is a very important thing. I mean, I haven’t finished a whole book of Derrida yet I rely on him utterly. David, you said you weren’t interested in performance theory. Neither am I. The only one I’ve ever re-read is Brecht. I don’t read anyone else again because it isn’t as stimulating as other stuff about culture in general where you have to find for yourself the performance edge.

Annette: I was thinking, what is it? You have this passion, this thing that you want to do. You think you’ve got this something inside you that’s kinda going. I think I wanna do something about ... oh ... this is ... [sounds of wrestling with an idea] and you know there’s something that you want to do or perform or explore, and then what I do I suppose is look for the discussion in and around that thing, and if it comes in the form of theory then it’s theory or it might be some other kind of discussion. And it is that thing of looking for that to invite, to engage the discussion on that Uh [grunt sound] thing that you want to kind of do. It’s a filtering out of those ideas and thoughts and over time and talking to people and doing stuff, and just observing, looking at images, looking at stuff that’s around, looking at the current culture ... Like if my whole thing is about opera or about singing or about voice, looking at the opera that’s happening here, the opera that’s happening there, looking at the discussion and the analytical, the essays that come out on different stuff and go what is that I want to say and how does that kind of interact with what’s happening at the moment.
David: Yeh. I think it's one of those things. If you collaborate, which I do, you end up using the language that's most appropriate to the people with whom you're collaborating. You can use a different language with each person. For example, with Peter (Eckersall) I've used the language of theory. And with one of my actors, I won't talk theory to them at all. It'll be completely about choreography. With another one it will be completely about the realisation of an image through multimedia. With somebody else it might be straight action-objective work on drama and that is the references that they will use.

Tess: How do you perceive the language with your audience. Is it a summation of all those?

David: Yeh. And that's really the pleasure of it because if your collaborations are really productive and constructive, you end up isolating the best bits that are appropriate to the thing you're trying to make and drawing on them so that you can get to the widest possible audience — because everybody thinks differently.

Annette: Collaboration is a really interesting one. I'm really glad that was brought up actually because there must be a whole ten million notions on the theory of collaboration — in organisational theory, in business — when are we going to start getting the organisational theories from business into theatre stuff and have that informing the way collaborative work is made.

Peter: I'd like to thank you all for your participation today and the support of Performance Space, and your work Fiona (Winning), and I hope it hasn't been too difficult and I hope the resulting publication is of some interest and assistance to you all. Thank you again for giving up your time and also, making those contributions today.

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