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# Hyperrealism and the Everyday: The Plays of Ranters Theatre

RAIMONDO CORTESE

## ABSTRACT

*This article reflects on the performance texts that I have written and dramaturged with Ranters Theatre over a twenty-two-year period, covering three phases of work, each of which engages everydayness as part of its methodology. A key focus is textual dramaturgy, how the text is constructed, critiqued and dramaturged in order to create a finished performance text or play. Comparison is drawn with other contemporary theatre practitioners in Melbourne and overseas who also engage the everyday as a central component of their raison d'être.*

*The application of everyday aesthetics within narrative and dramaturgical structures provides the performers with a platform to focus on the moment-to-moment minutiae of actions that take place between them.*

*In the theatre of the everyday that I describe, the audience is invited into the same conceptual space and time as the performers, one that sits in the blurred lines between the fictive and the real. The narrative frame is partly supplied and defined by the audience in a way that elicits and intensifies a need for the performance of the text to take place.*

*This article explores the ways in which everyday theatre and dialogue/situation reveal hidden agendas and subtextual content that would otherwise not present itself and would remain invisible within the everyday field itself. This same content, recontextualised and manipulated, while suggesting and inspiring new texts and actions, now offers itself as a 'reading' with the potential for profound implications for the viewer.*

Ranters Theatre was co-founded in 1994 by graduates of the Victorian College of the Arts. I have written, dramaturged and developed over forty texts for theatre and live performance since the early 1990s, many of them for that company. Each of Ranters' productions has a rigorous development period where the text and the action are continually refined. The company does not view performance as an end in itself but as a continuation of the development process with the inclusion of an audience. Since the company's inception, there has been a clear commitment to producing theatre, initially within an urban setting, that focuses on stripping away the artifice of acting/performing in order to release unconscious behaviour in the actor. The text becomes a prime mover of unconscious actions. The performance texts I write for Ranters must complement the company's acting process; they are pared-back and raw, with an improvisational tenor that approximates everyday speech. My early works – such as the twelve *Roulette* plays (1995–2002)<sup>1</sup> or *Features of Blown Youth* (1996)<sup>2</sup> – are examples of hyperrealist theatre, constructed around an agenda that

engages an ‘everyday aesthetic’. My writing over the past twenty-two years has evolved towards refining and synthesising this aesthetic.

With each new Ranters production, the text and performances have challenged stage conventions about character, plot, conflict, representation (temporal/spatial/persona), *mise-en-scène*, dramatic trajectory and theatrical language (i.e., metaphor, theme, history). While conventions such as written characterisations within representational settings, narrative arcs, subtle though distinct elements of conflict, are present at a minimal level in my early work, these have been eliminated entirely from later plays like *Affection*, *Holiday* and *Intimacy* (2006–10). The texts I write always eschew narration. A text’s content (as action) is revealed through the engagement of the actors. But a process of refinement and evolution is discernible when comparing earlier texts with later ones. My performance texts require the audience to commit themselves to defining/reading the action for themselves.

I write theatre texts that embody language as experiential engagement, emphasising the audience’s imaginary involvement; texts that utilise the multiple verbal discourses that present themselves within daily life: the banal, the ordinary, the vital, the fantastic all bound up to create a complex but fragmented textual entity. The languages of everyday existence, while often lacking a narrative centre, possess a rawness and vitality that transforms theatrical content via their enunciation in the present by an actor/performer.

The work of Alan Read is significant in analysing an ‘everyday aesthetic’ that defines itself in relationship to concrete people and sites. According to Read, ‘the everyday relies on a “saying” rather than a “said”’.<sup>3</sup> Rather than employing formal structures to assert a particular narrative supremacy, a text for everyday theatre enables the active engagement of the performer/

actor to sharing speech acts in the present – a fluid offer that embraces ‘liveness’. As Read elucidates: ‘The “said” of theatre exists in its repetition and reproduction; the “saying” in its improvisation and innovation’.<sup>4</sup>

The development of my own concept and practice of everyday theatre places Ranters as an early exponent of hyperrealism, alongside companies such as Oriza Hirata’s *Seinendan*,<sup>5</sup> Richard Maxwell’s New York City Players,<sup>6</sup> and Pan Pan.<sup>7</sup> In recognition of this, Ranters is regularly invited to international festivals and venues such as: Noorderzon Festival, Groningen; The Project Arts Centre, Dublin; Culturegest, Lisbon; the 1999 Theater Der Welt Festival, Berlin; PS122, New York; and Theaterformen, Braunschweig.

The innovations of the nineteenth-century naturalistic drama brought about by Chekhov have had a marked influence on Ranters. Brecht’s notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt* has also had an impact, as has Grotowski’s desire to ‘study what is hidden behind our everyday mask ... in order to sacrifice it, expose it’.<sup>8</sup>

My practice has also been influenced by Situationists Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and Constant, who have theorised on the everyday as a field of performance. Constant’s research into dynamic space, which ‘leads to constantly changing behavioural patterns’,<sup>9</sup> is an inspiration for the non-representational setting for many of my plays. My method for sourcing material is informed by Debord’s notion of the *dérive*, where the spectator, like a Baudelairean *flâneur*, engages in wandering about the everyday environment as a ‘mapping of the psychogeographical areas and ambience of the streets’.<sup>10</sup> Recent theorists, such as Alan Read, Sarah Gorman and Noelia Ruiz, provide a critical focus on everydayness in theatre, expounding on the ways in which the text of the everyday offers fragments, multiple trajectories and ‘seemingly random configurations making the

viewer responsible for the production's dramaturgy'.<sup>11</sup> For Read, theatre is a process of 'giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself'.<sup>12</sup> The everyday offers immeasurable minutiae of verbal and physical acts that can revolutionise the way theatre is constituted; traditional performative codes and structures can be dissolved and re-bound in a multifaceted relational matrix. The new everyday theatre 'resides in the micro-gestures of society, not in its flamboyant theatrical expressions concretised as the discourse of theatre'.<sup>13</sup>

Ranters generally works in theatre venues, but the work itself is non-representational, not only in terms of the performance space but in the way the actors perform. Ranters' actors play themselves, with full awareness of the audience. Rather than engage traditional performance codes, such as complex plots and narratives, larger-than-life characterisation, structured scenes driven by conflict, or mannered styles of performance, our initial productions, such as *Inconsolable* (1995), stripped them away. The company's interest lies in the spontaneous interplay to be found in everyday interaction. We see theatrical conventions as stymieing the ability of the performer to react in an immediate way to what is directly in front of them. We seek to break down the performance codes that impeded what we perceive as 'liveness' and awareness of the present. The key was to discover a process that enabled us to frame and distil the spontaneous minutiae of the everyday in a theatrical context. That way, we can reveal the 'mysteries' of everyday life that are not visible in an everyday setting. Ranters focuses on the transient, performative relationships between people that leave no reproducible trace. It seeks to engage the audience through the observation and reflection of encounters/actions with actors 'being themselves'. Our work investigates the ontology of presence.

The question critical to my own practice as a writer for the theatre is: how do I make a text not sound like a constructed text? How can I strip away the recognised conventions from theatrical language to make the spoken text appear unmediated? In Ranters' version of hyperrealist theatre, the most problematic issue in relation to language is that the spoken text is pre-determined. The performers have to discover a process to make it sound and feel spontaneous. The text becomes dynamic in utterance; its effects are felt in the performers who must engage their instinctive responses to every small alteration in their relationship with each other.

My writing process begins with observations of the everyday. The everyday allows me to absorb and redefine the multifarious ways in which language is utilised between people. Dialogue between people is generated from deep-seated, often unknown or indeterminate objectives that prompt and manifest themselves as conversation. As Lefebvre states, '[p]rior to knowledge and beyond it, are the body and the actions of the body'.<sup>14</sup> In the everyday encounter, language begins with the body.<sup>15</sup> The physical relationship impresses its myriad qualities upon a text. Recorded text from the everyday has a multi-layered structure that both resonates with the contextual surround that gave birth to it and also suggests possibilities for new ones. The everyday as a field contains multiple domains of performance, both quotidian and extraordinary.

Before I begin a hyperrealist writing project, I wander through the city of Melbourne (or another city), making copious notes of the conversations, encounters and happenings between people. My aim is to observe and record the relationship between the spoken discourse and the physical responses of the body when two or more people are conversing. These sites are mostly, but not always, where people are engaged in a relaxed state, as this best corresponds to my interest in stripping away self-conscious dramatic content.

Since the 1960s, wandering has been a motif for contemporary social theory, reflecting an ambition to realise theoretical discourse within the everyday. Lefebvre's notion of the 'urban tissue', the ceaseless city that is both real and psychological, encouraging the nomadic interplay of diverse societies, is pivotal in bridging modernist subjectivity into a post-modern articulation of space and the environment as a multiple narrative in itself.<sup>16</sup> De Certeau describes a critique of walking, endowing pedestrian movement with a legibility analogous to a series of speech acts; a decipherable score that functions as an 'appropriation of space', 'spatial acting-out of place' and 'relations to differentiated positions'.<sup>17</sup>

The Situationist *dérive* was employed to maximise sensory experiences that fulfil our childlike desire for adventure and exploration. Debord insists that the wanderer should not passively walk by, but should engage and provoke activities wherever possible. The modern city should assert 'games of rendezvous that would provoke situations, encounters in unfamiliar places'.<sup>18</sup> This will create the conditions for people to be aware of their 'behavioural disorientation and alert people to their imprisonment by routine'.<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on an active role for the artist suggests a view of everyday sites as a theatrical field.

Speech in the everyday captures a resonance of the dramatic surround, a verbal essence that gives expression to its physical impact yet defies our ability to encode or describe it. As de Certeau says, languages of the city are like a '*forest of gestures*', whose 'movements cannot be captured in a picture nor ... circumscribed in a text'.<sup>20</sup> Language in the everyday offers a break with narrative forms; it provides a means to instil dynamic physical responses in the performer that come into being when people encounter each other. The text encapsulates these microscopic, and at times physically overwhelming, permutations that ripple back and forth between interlocutors. Peter Brook

uses the Hindu word *sphota* to describe this process, the manifestation of ‘a flow of formless energies’.<sup>21</sup> The following excerpt was recorded in June 2008 in Federation Square, Melbourne.

*[A MAN IN NEW YORK CAP walks towards BUSINESS MAN.]*

BUSINESS MAN: How’s it going?

Man in New York cap: What’s up?

BUSINESS MAN: Day off.

Man in New York cap: Nice.

BUSINESS MAN: Yeah, it’s alright.

Man in New York cap: OK.

BUSINESS MAN: Yeah.

Man in New York cap: You enjoy the game?

BUSINESS MAN: Yeah, I reckon.

Content such as that cited above does not literally find its way into in my plays, but it does inform text creation. In the everyday, dialogue doesn’t follow clear-cut, dramatic patterns. Each conversation has its own idiosyncratic texture that is influenced by personal, socio-political, environmental, cultural and economic considerations. The section in its entirety is ambivalent; the relationship between the two men is unclear, and can be subsumed or invented by the performers speaking the lines. Any agenda is kept hidden, but is suggested by the repetition, circularity and manoeuvring in language. The men are talking, but don’t seem to know what they want to talk about, or even why they are talking.

The dialogue in an everyday encounter reflects only a small component of what occurs in any given situation, which is not dissimilar

to a theatrical encounter. As Brook succinctly puts it, in theatre, ‘the word is a small visible part of a gigantic unseen formation’.<sup>22</sup> The spoken text may not even be central to what is occurring, though the audience’s desire to seek rational explanation for what takes place around them can endow verbal language with a greater role than what it perhaps deserves. Everyday language is intertextual. It is constituted from a vast array of texts, from spoken language, recorded voices, overheard music, incursions from radio and TV, advertising, phone apps, and an infinite array of idiosyncratic languages that too rarely find their way into the theatre.

Everyday speech can be viewed as a sequence of verbal counterpoints, of expanding and diminishing events. Nuance and rhythm, fragmented utterance, inarticulate sentences, the meandering, free-floating shifts in speech, simultaneity, concatenation, disconnected narratives – these are qualities that theatre has traditionally ignored but which potentially reveal the slippages and cracks in performance where a fragile, underlying narrative is yearning to declare itself; they are definitive of everyday theatre. It is this unadulterated use of speech in relation to the body that has profoundly impacted on my writing and dramaturgy. The everyday is a site for innumerable events which, to paraphrase Anton Chekhov, might give rise to new thoughts and actions, moments of critical energy that lead to a thousand paths.<sup>23</sup>

In my early hyperrealist texts for *Ranters*, the dialogue is crafted to sound similar to everyday conversation. In plays such as *Features of Blown Youth*, or *Roulette*, narrative, story and action are built into the text in a way that is invisible to the audience. To achieve this effect, the conventions of narrative structure and characterisation are reconstituted and submerged within the underlying action. In plays such as *The Wall* (2003),<sup>24</sup> or *St Kilda Tales* (2001),<sup>25</sup> narrative and characterisation are

removed and dramatic action pared back. In later texts such as *Holiday* (2006)<sup>26</sup> and *Intimacy* (2010),<sup>27</sup> dramatic action and objectives are also stripped away. Events and scenes function in relational or juxtapositional networks by virtue of their context within the show. They do not refer to a time and place outside the theatre space.

Over a twenty-two-year period, each of my plays has progressed a hyperrealist aesthetic to a point where the boundary between fiction and reality is increasingly effaced. The audience is asked to supply the narrative frame, to imagine a story as it might impinge on their own lives, and reflect on their own underlying tensions and impulses for unconscious action. They take responsibility for what they see and how they see it. As Sodja Zupanc Lotker puts it in relation to postdramatic theatre: ‘The traditional coherent plot of a “well made” theatre play [is] atomised into a script with fragments as the main dramaturgical building blocks’.<sup>28</sup> My plays reject conventional unity and symmetry in favour of a rhizomic structure in which ‘unsurveyable branching and heterogeneous connections prevent synthesis’.<sup>29</sup> The pay-off for the spectator is direct contact, a heightened degree of intimacy that conventional theatre cannot cater for. The audience is placed at the heart of narrative and story construction; narrative fissures are created, which allow them to weave their life experiences into the fabric of the performance. Aristotle’s notion of unity of time<sup>30</sup> is replaced with a decentralised ordering of events that dissolves the disparity between theatrical time and real time. As Lotker says, ‘Spatial and temporal dynamics become the core of the dramatic composition in this era of fragmentary dramaturgy’.<sup>31</sup>

In *Roulette*, developed between 1995 and 2002, the construction of the ‘real’ is disguised to the point where it seems that there is no construction at all. Language in these plays is not tied to a narrative structure,

but is designed to give rise, as it does in everyday life, to unconscious behaviours. While the text is prompted by character reaction through the prism of an objective, the dialogue exists purely in relationship to human engagement. Performative language in these plays (verbal and physical) gives expression to the dynamic, irrational, instinctive, visceral aspects of the characters/actors. Their dialogue is impelled through action; narrative and story are embedded in, and indivisible from, a moment-to-moment evolutionary process that plays out in the realm of an ordinary, everyday encounter. There are no grand gestures and the plays are devoid of plot. The characters are nuanced and particularised, but we learn almost nothing about them. The fictional frame supporting them, while significant, is minimised. The plays unfold in real time, allowing the audience to frame what they experience as something akin to an everyday experience.

Below is an excerpt from *Inconsolable*,<sup>32</sup> the first of the *Roulette* plays, which marked a significant shift in my method of text creation, as well as Ranters' acting process. According to Adriano Cortese, the director of Ranters, *Roulette* 'helped to define Ranters' performance style: raw and immediate, seemingly improvised, haphazard in structure'.<sup>33</sup> The play was written in one sitting, in a two-hour bloc.

*[TOM is sitting in a cafe. He mutters under his breath, begins to whistle a favourite tune, then pulls out James Joyce's Ulysses from his briefcase under the table and begins to read it. KAT approaches him.]*

KAT: I'm not disturbing you ... am I?

TOM: No ... no ... disturb me. Ah ... can I order you a cigarette?

KAT: What ...?

TOM: Sorry, I mean ...

KAT: No ... I've had a couple already thanks.

TOM: Oh ...

KAT: Just thought I'd sit down.

TOM: Sure.

*[KAT sits down in the spare seat opposite TOM.]*

KAT: I could sit somewhere else if you like?

TOM: No problem ...

KAT: Just felt like ...

TOM: Well, course ...

KAT: You know ... talking to someone ...

TOM: Course ...

KAT: Who I don't know.

TOM: It's OK ... right where you are.

KAT: And you seemed ... nice enough.

TOM: Oh ... thank you.

KAT: I mean ... you know ... from a glance.

TOM: Yes, I know what you mean.<sup>34</sup>

In writing *Roulette*, I focused on imaginary physical circumstances and, more importantly, the physical relationship between two imaginary personas. I began each play by having a clear objective for each persona. Tom wants to meet a partner, whom he believes will fulfil what he thinks

is missing in his life. Kat wants to free herself from her relationship, and needs Tom to help her achieve this. Sal in *Borneo* is seeking someone she can manipulate into trusting her, so she can plant drugs on them. Angela, her opposite, wants to befriend someone in order to confess her secrets. In *Fortune*, Terry wants to appease and reassure Vince that he is not a threat, in order to stay in his house. Vince wants to control Terry to the point where he is enslaved.

While the objective for each persona is clearly defined, they are usually different and in contradistinction to each other. I did not work with actions or tasks. I did not think about *how* the personas achieved their objectives, as I believed that this would make the writing too self-conscious and contrived. Nor did I ask myself what their character histories were – what had happened in their lives to bring them to this point. I was not interested in delving into their psychology, grounding the action in backstory and analysis. The text generates an immediate physical response from each persona that carries them to their objectives, which in turn activates the imagination of the audience.

The dialogue is constructed around certain principles of dramatic action. While there is no teleological trajectory within the text, the plays do follow a causal logic at a psychological level. The characters' behaviours are in direct response to an action in the actor/character with whom they are engaged. This reaction/response dynamic between characters conveys an interactive through-line that finds its corollary in both structure and text. While there is negligible external story pertaining to fictive information, the 'real' story is the sum of the multiple shifts that occur between the characters. They are not conscious of affecting change; they do so accidentally, without awareness, so creating an unexpected and highly variable series of moves and counter moves.

The plays explore chance meetings between strangers, or people who know each other but have lost connection. Familiar rituals of personal exchange soon give way to uncertainty. The spaces between characters are uncharted, tenuous and give rise to unpredictable response mechanisms. In rewriting, I spoke the lines out loud, incorporating the rhythms, pauses, non-sequiturs, ellipses, vocal textures, repetitions, concatenation and verbal patterning present in my own speech or influenced by observations of people in the everyday. This process created a continual rupturing of dramatic pattern; rather than relying on narrative to progress a linear story, the *Roulette* plays focus on revealing an underlying ontology which expresses itself through an everyday physical/linguistic dichotomy.

According to Erving Goffman, everyday conversation often resembles the way theatrical scenes are constructed due to the fact that the former provides the model on which the latter are based.<sup>35</sup> But conversations within the everyday tend to ramble, are repetitious, do not aim towards any particular structure, which is very different from the writing in my plays. The everyday interlocutor has more latitude than a character in *Roulette*. While having the appearance of free rein, the text in *Roulette* is constructed to pursue an objective end point, which is then resisted and obstructed by the dialogue, through ‘an elaborate labyrinth of sidesteps and manoeuvres’.<sup>36</sup> Having created this end point in advance, I disguise the pathway towards it by manipulating language and action, to allow the audience to invest themselves in the dramaturgy.

Ranters’ productions unfold in real time. The plays that followed *Roulette*, such as *St Kilda Tales* and *The Wall*, use everyday language as a model but they are not verbatim texts. There is a focus on action, which is disguised, resisted, stretched and distorted. But these middle plays include a more complex, multi-persona narrative structure within a non-repre-

sentational situation. They do not privilege any one persona. The dialogue sequences in *St Kilda Tales* and *The Wall* are organised according to a thematic and rhythmic matrix, which unfolds in real time. The dramaturgical structure is designed to constantly shift the action, creating a 'rhythm of alternating slackness and static electricity ... breaking through expectations of the well-organised play'.<sup>37</sup> These plays utilise textual shifts to open up cracks in narrative authority and ultimately disintegrate it. The action and dialogue are out of alignment and progress down an uncertain and difficult path. The personas are rubbed in the wrong direction; they are overwhelmed by unconscious impulses, which bring up unexpected consequences. As with *Roulette*, the plays have no external story or plot. The audience occupy the same concrete reality as the performers, 'sharing an as yet only partly defined space'.<sup>38</sup> The boundary between the everyday theatre and the audience becomes interchangeable and blurred. This new dimension shifts the ground of traditional dramatic theatre to become, in Lehmann's phrase, '[more] presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information'.<sup>39</sup>

In *The Wall* or *St Kilda Tales*, dialogue is constructed in a neutral register. Personas consist of the individuated contribution of the performer saying the lines. They are not emphasised in the original text. On occasion, when I detected 'character' nuance in the dialogue, I stripped this element away.

The excerpt below comes from *The Wall*. The personas are given names, but they are not 'characters' in any traditional sense. We learn little about their lives, their dialogue is not particularised and there is no psychological development revealed through their interaction with others. The dialogic focus is on the moment, and devoid of teleological progression.

ZEL: You want to have coffee later?

PARIS: Yeah? Whereabouts?

ZEL: I've got to do a few things first. How bout I call you?

PARIS: OK. Great. I'll give you my card.

*[PARIS gives ZEL his card.]*

ZEL: Hmm.

PARIS: It'd be great to catch up.

ZEL: Of course. You'll be here?

PARIS: Yeah.

ZEL: Do you have a car?

PARIS: Yeah.

ZEL: Maybe we can go somewhere else if you want.

PARIS: Sure.

ZEL: A drive somewhere?

PARIS: Yeah, I'd love to.

ZEL: Nice to get away from here, I think.

PARIS: We can go wherever.

ZEL: I think so.

*[ZEL gets up and goes to leave.]<sup>40</sup>*

The second critical difference is that that the texts are conceived without reference to a fictional location, so the spaces are non-representational. While the performers in the earlier *Roulette* plays worked with an awareness of the audience, in *St Kilda Tales* and *The Wall* they are given

the specific instruction to regard the theatrical site as a concrete reality. Both *Features of Blown Youth* and the *Roulette* plays maintain a fictional location. In *St Kilda Tales* and *The Wall*, all references to an external space, outside the frame of the theatrical context, are removed from the dialogue. The content reflects a concrete stage, with the audience sharing the same conceptual space and time as the performers.

Most audiences come to the theatre expecting a fictional stage arena. If the success or otherwise of a theatre event is measured by audience response, then any prior knowledge of the event becomes significant. In the everyday, our prior knowledge of the way a person behaves, their particular mannerisms, characteristics, affectations and foibles, will affect our opinion of them. In theatre, as in real life, it helps to understand the context and parameters of the performance. We are more likely to accept what we are already familiar with. In a process defined by Goffman as ‘anticipatory socialisation’, we are already ‘schooled in the reality that is just coming to be real for us’.<sup>41</sup> Few critics would argue that the plays of Shakespeare possess little or no drama. One reason for this is that we are well schooled in Shakespearean notions of dramatic action. In the case of contemporary theatre texts, critics’ views of what is dramatic can vary widely. The reason for this is that the performance codes of much new writing, including hyperrealism, have not yet embedded themselves broadly enough within the critical audience, rendering the ‘dramatic’ content invisible on the page and/or in performance.

Moving beyond representation is nothing particularly new in itself. Since the 1960s, performance art has shifted away from representational language towards an engagement with the intricate verbal manoeuvres people use in everyday situations to mediate their thoughts and feelings. Yoko Ono, in a work at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, requested that

visitors to her exhibition ‘draw an imaginary map ... then go walking on an actual street according to the map’.<sup>42</sup> The everyday in this context freights a multiplicity of meanings and inferences, an understated assertion of performance. There are many examples of spectacle or public site-specific theatre where the construction of a narrative includes audience response, such as Lone Twin’s *To The Dogs*,<sup>43</sup> where the performers ride around a city on a bike and talk to people, or Back to Back’s *Small Metal Objects*, where members of the public are interviewed by performers. This movement of theatre from organised theatrical construct into everyday life is advanced through the use of digital technology in contemporary art practice and the tendency of theatre-makers to cross over into other artistic disciplines, such as Live Art, where audience interactivity is at the heart of the work.

While the narrative content in Ranters’ productions only rarely includes verbal responses from the audience, my texts are constructed to allow a moment-to-moment reconfiguring of the action. The instability of the narrative patterns – the creation of diegetic fissures, breakages in dialogic response, the lack of history or character information – is a way of encouraging the audience to ask questions of the performance content. My plays require the actor to make decisions by choosing actions that correlate with their own emotional and psychological perspective. The role of silence, pauses, disruptions of physical dynamics, the use of repetition, and the sustained presence of the performers, are all ways of enabling the audience to activate an invented response to what they experience. According to Lehmann, a performance ‘with a low density of signs aims to provoke the spectator’s imagination’.<sup>44</sup>

With the development of Ranters’ texts *Holiday*, *Affection* (2008),<sup>45</sup> *Intimacy* and *Come Away to the End of the World* (2016),<sup>46</sup> conventional narrative, story and dramatic action are removed entirely. These texts

were not constructed with actions or objectives in mind. They represent interaction devoid of agenda. The lack of actions and objectives results in the non-existence of plot and story. The texts demonstrate what Lehman refers to as a ‘dwindling of the dramatic impulse’.<sup>47</sup> The dialogue is stripped of nuance; it reflects neither natural speech nor formalised utterances. It is devoid of particular social register. Nor do the texts use narrative patterns, nuance or rhythmic variations to suggest character or gender. They employ a flat, unadorned language. There are no naturalistic segues between sequences. Instead, the dialogue sequences have a theme-based, juxtapositional organisation. The conversations in *Holiday*, *Affection*, *Intimacy* and *Come Away...* begin around a particular theme, which abruptly ends or winds down. Conversation flows laterally from one subject to the next without logical coherence. Topics include: taking pets to the vet, Chinese medicine, the nature of performance in the everyday, poetry, architecture, roller-coaster rides, travelling, and so on, but devoid of narrative unity. The plays are structured so that, at any moment, they could stop; the text allows for dramatic annihilation – what Eckersall and Paterson describe succinctly as ‘dramaturgical collapse’.<sup>48</sup>

As with my earlier hyperrealist texts, *Holiday* does not engage character. Personas are ascribed names out of convenience. They could just as easily be called something else. The text provides no information about what they do for work, where they live, which city they are in, who their loved ones are, etc. This absence of history or identity takes the process of de-characterisation further than in my previous works. The dialogue is stripped of nuance; the non-sequiturs, slippages, murmurs, fragmented rhythms that imply individuated responses are pared down even further. The text does not mirror natural conversation. There are no ice-breakers. Conversation begins, engages a particular theme or content, then segues

to another sequence of dialogue without apparent connection to what has already been said. The audience is required to supply the narrative frame themselves. Instead of a process of causal logic, or narrative contiguity as with traditional theatre texts, the dialogue sequences are constructed through thematic juxtaposition, or equivalency. My later texts are built around ‘disparate heterogeneity’, which accumulates as an unconscious narrative in the minds of the audience and leads to ‘the intensified perception of the individual phenomenon and simultaneously to the discovery of surprising *correspondences*’.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the most radical development is the absence of actions or objectives. The texts are shaped purely in relation to aesthetic determinants discovered in rehearsal – relationship to space, duration, physicality – and to thematic considerations. The structure of the text remained unaltered, but any semblance of fictional content, or dramatic tension, was smoothed out.

Another new development in my later plays is the inclusion of baroque songs by Gluck, Paisello, Schubert, Pergolesi and Bononcini. These are sung at various points during production. They reveal the subtext, hidden desire and yearnings not made manifest in the dialogue sequences. In *Affection*, the inclusion of songs by The Ramones, Brian Wilson and François Couperin ruptures the dramatic pattern and creates a layer of subtextual inferences suggestive of unrealised and unrealisable aspirations. These texts also utilise a greater deployment of intertextuality. In *Holiday*, there are quotes from Hafiz and Ernst Jandl, alongside references to pop culture, Hinduism and Mexican film-making.

In my texts with *Ranters*, the dialogue exists in theatrical relationship to everything else that occurs onstage; there is no attempt to represent a reality beyond the material presence of the space that the

performers occupy. This is reflected in the dialogue, which at no point refers to a fictive space in proximity to the space being performed in – so the text does not refer to a space ‘down the road’ or ‘that shop nearby that sells apricots’. The fictive spaces mentioned are stripped of specific details so that they can be positioned in a city anywhere in the world. In other words, the audience have no way of knowing whether these spaces or locations are real or not. The following excerpt from *Holiday* indicates this quality in the dialogue.

PAUL: She leads us into the lounge room. The furniture.

It was all the same colour. And very spaced apart.

ARNO: You’re dreaming, aren’t you?

*[Silence.]*

PAUL: We were invited to sit down. The woman offered us a drink ... it was greenish ... I took off my shoes. And I go and lie down. My friend comes and lies down next to me. The woman starts talking. Or singing ... something ... I can’t remember. She just keeps singing ... or talking ...

*[Silence.]*

PAUL: What are you looking at?

ARNO: Just your face.

*[Silence.]*<sup>50</sup>

The obliteration of narrative and action takes my hyperrealist approach to theatre further than previous texts. The space is opened for the audience to infuse the dialogue with their own narrative frame. Narrative

and causal logic are fragmented and dissolved. There is a ‘collapse of boundaries’ that distinguishes post-modern theatre, but in the case of the latter texts, the removal of the desire to fictionalise creates a space that is then filled with an audience’s imagination.<sup>51</sup> The texts resist resolution, their component parts providing instead what Lehmann calls the ‘basic motifs of activating theatre’.<sup>52</sup> The creation of a meditative, relaxed ambience provides an open invitation to the audience to reflect, fantasise and invent their own narrative that infuses the original text with their own meanings and significance.

In the section of *Holiday* quoted above, the performer playing Paul is describing a meeting he had with a woman on a beach, which may or may not be real. Having constructed a metonymic space with a gentle, fluid ambience, the performers now demolish the ‘real’ by suggesting that one of the performers is in fact ‘dreaming’. It posits the question, which underpins the play as a whole: is the ‘real’ as illusory as fiction? Is the suggestion that the material reality of the space and the performers is in fact no less illusory than a fictive space or persona? The phenomenological method used in writing the text creates an underlying tension between the audience’s expectation of what is occurring and the disintegration of the action that beckons during its silences. This tension is compounded by the ambiguity that intrudes as the performance progresses. The development of a material space and persona presence is blurred within a real–unreal dichotomy. What is real and what is not is increasingly brought into doubt.

In this new variant of everyday theatre, what Eckersall and Paterson describe as a ‘new alternative-dramatic paradigm’, the removal of the action/dramatic imperative, offers the audience the opportunity to reflect on their own internal stories.<sup>53</sup> The text is designed to slow down time, to create fragile and ephemeral spaces between performers and audience.

These spaces are filled by the audience's awareness of their own tenuous performances within the entire field of human interaction. The new everyday theatre takes the audience beyond their own self-imposed exile in the domain of purpose-built theatre venues, and into the streets we inhabit daily, and beyond that into our own imaginary lives.

### NOTES

- 1 Premiered at the Price Theatre, 2000 Adelaide Arts Festival.
- 2 Premiered at the Economiser Building, 1997 Melbourne Festival of the Arts.
- 3 Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1993) 95.
- 4 *Ibid* 95.
- 5 Formed in Tokyo in 1983 by Oriza Hirata, who defined their theatrical aesthetic as 'Quiet Theatre'.
- 6 Founded in New York City in 1996 by Richard Maxwell, the company is a seminal example of hyperrealist theatre and has toured to over sixteen countries.
- 7 Founded by Gavin Quinn and Aedin Cosgrove in 1992, the company is devoted to exploring new performance ideas.
- 8 Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba (London: Methuen, 1975) 37.
- 9 Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998) 275.
- 10 Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life*, 117.
- 11 Peter Crawley and Willie White (eds), *No More Drama* (Dublin: Project Press, 2010) 23.
- 12 Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life*, 95.
- 13 *Ibid*.
- 14 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 135.
- 15 Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 56.
- 16 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 99.
- 17 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California, 1988) 97.
- 18 Debord cited in Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 94.
- 19 *Ibid*.
- 20 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.
- 21 Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets* (London: Methuen, 1993) 50.
- 22 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1980) 15.
- 23 Chris McGuire, *Chekhov*, author upload, 2008. Online: [www.chrismcguire.net/uploads/Chekhov.doc](http://www.chrismcguire.net/uploads/Chekhov.doc).

- 24 Première at Horti Hall for the 2003 Melbourne International Arts Festival.
- 25 Première at the Merlyn Theatre, as a co-production with Playbox Theatre for the 2001 Centenary of Federation Festival.
- 26 Première in 2007 at Arts House.
- 27 Première in The Beckett Theatre as a co-production with the Malthouse Theatre for the 2010 Melbourne Festival of the Arts.
- 28 Sodja Zupanc Lotker, 'Dramaturgy' in Peter Crawley and Willie White (eds), *No More Drama* (Dublin: Project Press, 2010) 198.
- 29 Deleuze and Guattari cited in Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006) 90.
- 30 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996) 15.
- 31 Lotker, 'Dramaturgy', 205.
- 32 Première with Ranters at La Mama in September 1996.
- 33 Raimondo Cortese, *Roulette: 12 Dialogues* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005) viii.
- 34 *Ibid* 1.
- 35 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Allen Lane Penguin Press, 1969) 78.
- 36 Cortese, *Roulette: 12 Dialogues*, ix.
- 37 Richard Murphet, 'Reality Theatre Ranters Style', *RealTime Magazine*, 2001, 16.
- 38 Jacob Wren, 'Theatre Reminds Me of Politics', in Peter Crawley and Willie White (eds), *No More Drama* (Dublin: Project Press, 2010) 64.
- 39 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 85.
- 40 Première with Ranters Theatre at Horti Hall, as part of the 2003 Melbourne International Arts Festival.
- 41 Erving Goffman, *Behaviour in Public Places* (New York: The Free Press, 1963) 79.
- 42 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979) 124.
- 43 Première at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, in 2004.
- 44 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 90.
- 45 Première in 2008 at the Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff.
- 46 Première in 2016 in the Beckett Theatre as a co-production with the Malthouse Theatre.
- 47 Hans-Thies Lehmann cited in Peter Eckersall and Eddie Paterson, 'Slow Dramaturgy and the Everyday', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 58 (2011): 7.
- 48 Eckersall and Paterson, 'Slow Dramaturgy and the Everyday', 7.
- 49 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 84.
- 50 Raimondo Cortese, *Holiday* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2009) 27.
- 51 Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 44.
- 52 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 90.
- 53 Eckersall and Paterson, 'Slow Dramaturgy and the Everyday', 7.