

WORD AND FLESH: FRAMING THE SPACE IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES IN CHURCHES

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In a village in the Yorkshire Dales, in the rural North of England, an elderly woman enters the church. She is greeted at the door and makes her way to her regular seat among a gathering of people, many of whom she has known for years. A man steps up to the lectern and begins to deliver a eulogy to Nathaniel, a farmer who has died suddenly in middle age. The church building fills and echoes to the sound of the speaker's words as he shares memories of Nathaniel with his listeners, who sit, silently attentive. When he finishes speaking, lights come up behind him on the cramped interior of a cottage, framed in the wider space of the church. There is a pile of laundry, a table and chairs, an exit upstage. Because this is not, in fact, a funeral, but the performance of a play. The congregation is also an audience, the elderly woman is both a worshipper and a spectator, the site is at once a church and a performance space.

This paper will expand upon the complexities implied by this convergence of event, meaning, site, space – all somewhat slippery terms – considering further the relationship between space and text, from the perspective of the playwright. *Simeon's Watch* was commissioned from me as a writer in 2016. The play tells the story of a contemporary family facing the experience of dementia, but it also draws on the biblical story of Simeon, who appears in Luke's gospel as a

man to whom it has been prophesied that he will not die until he has seen his salvation – that is, the Christ child. *Simeon's Watch* presents three generations of sheep-farmers: Simeon, who at the start of the play is beginning to exhibit signs of dementia, his daughter, Leah, and grand-daughter, Rina. As the family wrestles with the challenges and change presented by Simeon's illness, he moves towards apparently increasing inaccessibility and death. However, the horizon of the piece offers an alternative perspective of hope and a re-consideration of the ways in which relationships and communication can be preserved for people experiencing dementia, and their loved ones. It toured in the run-up to Christmas, playing for single performances in community venues, which were usually churches in rural areas. While this was in part determined by the modus operandi of the commissioning theatre company, there was also a dramatic, artistic requirement for the play to sit comfortably within those performance spaces, and to speak into the vernacular of the site-generic locations. The commission demanded a piece that could speak the languages, codes and signifiers of both theatre and church, and enable the audience to receive the play bilingually. This was in part a challenge to the visual and material aspects of production, design and direction, but it also presented a juxtaposition that needed to be expressed within the script.

The debate around space and place in theatre is lively and populated with divergent terminology. The proposition in Peter Brook's seminal work that there could be such a thing as an "empty space" (Brook, 1969) has been argued over and refuted, for example by Chris Goode, who aligns himself with John Cage's assertion that "there is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time" (Cage in Goode, 2015, Ch.1). Brook himself develops his earlier argument by acknowledging that his quest to discover an "empty" space in which to make theatre was a reaction against making and seeing work that "has always been within a context. The context is either geographical, cultural or linguistic, so that we work within a system" (Brook in Goode). Goode contends that Brook's response in the "staking out of an empty space" may be "blandly attractive",

but “there is something terrible going on: because nobody lives there” (Goode). This is an instructive debate in the consideration of understanding how the interaction between a piece of performance and the physical space in which it is performed can result in thick and complex layering of meanings. When a piece of theatre not only sits within a site but accrues that site’s significance, it can engage the audience in an effective and affective conversation. Goode has indicated that “the experience of an audience may have much to do with the idea of a particular ‘place’, especially one they know” (Goode). He goes on to reflect on the nature and character of churches as representing a “space that, viewed secularly in formal terms at least, could serve simply as a site for community gathering, the circulating of information, the celebratory enaction of lives shared”. However, he concludes that “their meaning is defined in practice not by their appointed custodians but by their users, and not in abstraction but in the enaction of... that useage” (Goode). If we view this in Brook’s terms, we can conclude that a church presents a context, and represents a system.

Expanded Scenography and Site-Generic Performance

While Cathy Turner bemoans the fact that “architecture is often considered as though we can separate the meaning of buildings from their habitation” (Turner, 2015, p.2), subsequent commentaries have addressed this blind spot through a discussion of expanded scenography arising from the increasing use and understanding of found space as sites for performance. McKinney and Palmer propose that “expanded scenography utilizes space not simply as a backdrop but as an active part of the process of inviting spectators to situate themselves with regard to their lived experience” (McKinney & Palmer, 2017, p.1). The lived experience of a church member in relation to their church building manifests itself culturally, socially, spiritually and practically. It is a space that has been architecturally conceived, but it is also a place of meeting, of worship, of community, and of multiple functions. In addition to their structural and symbolic architecture, churches are cluttered with the rather more prosaic

paraphernalia of functionality: heaters and speakers, microphones, stacks of additional chairs, hand-crafted banners, flower arrangements; a visually chaotic story of the life lived within the space.

In this context, the notion of expanded scenography as one that, in McKinney and Palmer's terms, shapes "the interface between the performance and the audiences" (McKinney & Palmer, 2017, p.6), creating "a mode of encounter and exchange... between bodies, objects and environments" (McKinney & Palmer, p.2) becomes tangible, and presents us with three spaces, which I will discuss: the physical space, the conceptual space and the congregational space.

The Physical Space

McKinney and Palmer's observation that "There is an inherent notion of performance and event in architecture" (McKinney & Palmer, 2017, p.10) is readily apparent in the physical space of churches, that provides the setting for rites, rituals and gatherings that are not in themselves theatre but are rich in theatricality. This is the case regardless of the vastly differing styles, ages and sizes of many church buildings: they share a common purpose, meaning that in addition to their conceptual affiliation with performance, churches also – in their physical architecture – provide many of the material conditions for performance events where an audience will observe an action of some sort. But it does not follow that churches are therefore appropriate spaces for the staging of almost any form of theatrical performance. The architectural and scenographic foundations for a piece of theatre that is performed in a church are the generic and particular canvas against which any theatrical design will be seen, and they demand recognition of the additional layers of perception that will result. Gay McAuley describes space as "crucial to understanding the nature of the performance event and how meanings are constructed and communicated" (McAuley, 1999, p.278). The set for *Simeon's Watch* was compact: a raised platform on which a claustrophobically small domestic setting (opening up to a simple hillside in the second half) provided a focused context

for the performance, but it sat – physically – within the larger space of the church. That larger space, which changed every night of the tour, told its own story and spoke its own physical language: of history, community, iconography and function, and was visible to the audience throughout the performance. Thus the play was presented at every performance within two frames: the outer frame of the church building, the inner frame of the theatrical setting. In performance, this allowed the audience’s experience to take the form of Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O’Flynn’s ‘*oscillation*’ between different modes of engagement and levels of immersion (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013). And the physical relationship between the two frames expressed a psychological expectation: that the play being performed would sit within the cultural, social and spiritual framing with which the audience arrived.

Clifford McLucas characterises this matrix as starting with “the host and the ghost” as an expression of

(...) the relationship between place and event. The host site is haunted for a time by a ghost that the theatre-makers create. Like all ghosts it is transparent and the host can be seen through the ghost. (McLucas in Kaye, 2000, p.168)

In a church, the space is both lived and – by implication – historic: churches exude a connection to the past, some through their antiquity, and their semi-fixed features of memorial tablets, books of remembrance, and so on, and all through the significance of their role as mediating contexts for life rituals such as baptism, marriage and burial, as well as the weekly rite of people gathering together and self-identifying as a community with a sense of its own history. This constitutes an expression of Mike Pearson’s “‘single stratum’: the idea that all we ever see is the present, but that the present is itself infiltrated by relics of the past” (Pearson, 2014), a description that also – in its suggestion that the past can make incursions upon the present – goes to the heart of the experience of dementia that *Simeon’s Watch* explores. So the layering, and simultaneous

experience of past and present, and the porosity of the boundary between the two, are expressed as active elements by both the play itself and the site of performance.

The Conceptual Space

In considering the conceptual space represented by a church, the most assertive feature is that a church building is not neutral to performer or spectator: it is designed as a sacred space, and even when other, more secular activities take place within it, they are set against a backdrop that is purposed – and used – for communal acts of worship. At the very least, Pearson’s observation that “Religious buildings are freighted with history, with established routines of observance, with atmospheres of piety” (Pearson, 2010, p.64) begins to articulate the particular character of the host. If we consider a church within the framework of Elam’s spatial codes (the architectural, interpersonal, scenic and virtual, which combine to define dramatic space – Elam, 1980), the fixed and semi-fixed architectural features of the space itself tell the stories of the Christian faith: altars and crucifixes evoke sacrifice, sanctuaries speak of holiness, architectural grandeur imitates the grandeur of heaven. Wherever a performance of *Simeon’s Watch* was performed, these physical features were untouched, so while the scenes of the play were set in a cottage, a pub, or a hillside, the insistently visible, material signifiers of the spiritual function for which the framing church building was purposed remained while the performance was grafted onto it. The significance of this layering extended beyond the visual, however: it provided a lens through which the meaning of the play comes into focus; an implication that the experience of the characters, and the subject of the play, is not distinct or separate from a spiritual understanding of life, but is held within it. Key to the analysis of the power of this effect is the simple fact that it could not have been achieved in any performance site that was not a place of worship. So the church itself represents a further active element within the dynamic of the play’s reception; a participator in the collaboration between what Rachel Hann has

described as the “human and non-human agents that render a place as eventful, attentive” (Hann, 2019, p.4).

The Congregational Space

The human agents of that rendering define the congregational space. At performances of *Simeon's Watch*, the audience was usually largely comprised of the congregation of the church that was hosting the performance. As such, they were people who not only knew each other but who shared deep connections and a willingness to engage emotionally with one another. Additionally, this audience brought a web of expectations that embraced the theatrical, cultural and spiritual; what Susan Bennett describes as “a horizon of cultural and ideological expectations” (Bennett, 1997, p.98). They came primed with ties of friendship, shared values, faith and community, and from their perspective as spectators, both the familiar space and the relationships between human and non-human elements had the potential to be re-conceived through participation in an act of theatre. As a congregation, familiar with participation in services, their mode of engagement was habitually active rather than passive. As an audience, they comprised a community of interest, co-constructive in the interface between themselves and the performance. In such familiar surroundings, it may become difficult for the congregation member – or spectator – to make a distinction between the communal experience of participation in an act of worship, and that of watching a theatrical performance, meaning that the meeting point of Sarah Grochala's lived space and dramatic space is situated not solely in the non-human physical place of performance, but also in the human experience of the individual spectator. So we can view the audience in this context – both as a body and as individuals – as a form of human architecture; a specific space, with a particular character, within which the performance is situated and experienced, and one that completes McLucas's “trinity that constitutes the work” – of the host, the ghost and “the witness, i.e. the audience” (McLucas in Kaye, 2000, p.128).

Architecture and Dramaturgy

Returning to the concept of two frames, Bennett sees the audience's response as a force that brings the frames together:

(...) the outer frame contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event. The inner frame contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space. The audience's role is carried out within these two frames and, perhaps most importantly, at their points of intersection. It is the interactive relations between audience and stage, spectator and spectator which... cause the inner and outer frames to converge for the creation of a particular experience. (Bennett, 1997, p.139)

The language here – of frames, convergence, space and intersection – is structural, suggesting that the entire event might be viewed as a form of architecture, or – as McLucas suggests – a number of architectures that are of “different orders of material, some conceptual, some spatial” (McLucas, c.1993-94). This expansion of the definition of ‘architecture’ has prompted Cathy Turner to link it to her understanding of dramaturgy as a concept that relates ideas to structure: “In each case, what is being articulated is the relationship of diverse elements in a spatio-temporal structure, at once conceptual, material/sensory and symbolic/mimetic” (Turner, 2009, p.2). As the production of *Simeon's Watch* demonstrates, this relationship of diverse elements can result in a complex and distinctive event, both through the intended design of the piece as a whole – its conceptual and ideological foundations – and through the less clearly-defined details presented by the individual churches where the play was performed. The performance acted as a catalyst for spectators to re-frame their relationship with familiar church buildings, with their own narratives connecting with that of the play, evoking Doreen Massey's description of place as being “unfinished business” that is “woven together out of ongoing stories” (Massey, 2005, p.131).

Space and Text

But this account of the symbiotic relationship between space, performance and audience can be further extrapolated – to consider the relationship between space and text through the genesis and construction of the play itself. From the outset, the commission required a play that was conceived structurally and thematically in response to the spaces of performance. The relationship of audience to site became a key factor within the writing of the play, and these elements in turn defined spaces that the text was written out of and into.

The start of the play demonstrates this, deliberately drawing upon the potency of the intersection between the outer and inner frames, acknowledging that the spectators may – at least in part – identify themselves primarily as a congregation rather than an audience. The opening scene, set in a church, in which Simeon gives the eulogy at his son-in-law's funeral, appears at first to be located within the outer frame of the church space, before drawing the us into the inner domestic frame, where the dramatic action of the play is located. It provides a bridge for the spectator to cross from their own world into the world of the play. In the crossing of that bridge, they are transformed from congregation to audience. In writing of a theatrical performance in a chapel, Pearson suggests that “extant practices suggest a dramaturgical structure, as performance adopts the practicalities of the chapel” (Pearson, 2010, p.63). The opening of *Simeon's Watch* gives spectators a familiar entry point, where they are directly addressed in a church setting – cast by Simeon as the family and friends gathered to mourn Nathaniel. As Simeon's speech ends, and the focus moves to his grand-daughter, the audience is drawn fully into the lives of the play's characters, entering a more fully theatrical dimension, and a world that, while familiar, is distinct from their own.

Considered as a whole, the arc of the play takes on a particular resonance when viewed against its setting in a church. Where – in a different performance context – Simeon's journey through the play might be regarded as a progress towards increasing confusion and death, in a church the space becomes – as Gay

McAuley proposes – “a dynamic player” rather than “simply the background to, or neutral container for, actions” (McAuley, 2006, p.15), with the result that Simeon’s departure from the ‘real’ and domestic world seems to draw him closer to heaven. So while the site-generic setting informed some aspects of the writing at the point of commission, it also created a commentary upon the play at the point of performance, providing an architectural context within which aspects of the play’s significance were altered.

Understanding the nature of the particular settings in which the final production would be placed was key to the way in which the story was conceived and framed, giving familiar entry and exit points for the audience and allowing for the wider context to speak into the play’s narrative. While the terms of the commission may have focused primarily on the physical and material constraints of production, the act of writing was undertaken with a constant awareness that I was not only conjuring a fictional onstage world, but also managing that world’s interface with an offstage one, which existed in a discrete dimension: that of the ‘reality’ inhabited and experienced by the audience. Goode posits that “staged work that is able to apply itself to the specific conditions of the encounter it initiates will cause its audience to feel that the work is, for once, about them” (Goode, 2015, Ch.1). Enabling the audience to identify with the situations and the characters was part of the reasoning behind the use of direct address in the play, so that spectators felt that they were being spoken to personally. Again, the setting of the play within a church allowed those passages to resonate with familiar forms of direct address deriving from the space. And they implied a relationship with audience members in which each of the characters had their own way of speaking. Simeon addresses them as a congregation; for Leah they are the confidants to whom she reveals her feelings when she visits the church’s Knit and Natter group; while Rina casts them as the audience at the Pub’s open mic nights, where she develops a stand-up routine in which she reflects on her grandfather’s condition. Each of these allots a role to the audience, giving them a stake in the story and allowing them to move between intimacy and distance, identifying and

connecting at different levels. And in articulating different aspects of the space's relationship to individuals, these theatrical devices assert Dorita Hannah's vision of architecture as "a complex and active player in our everyday lives" (Hannah, 2019, p.1). In doing so, however, they also simultaneously confer separate and distinct identities on the space itself, presenting different lenses through which the narrative – and the subject – can be viewed.

Constraint and Creativity

In considering the influence of the physical, conceptual, and congregational spaces upon the artist's response to a commission, my reflections point to the familiar landscape of constraint and creativity that is inhabited so often when making work in non-conventional spaces. Where the acceptance of a single, physical understanding of what an architectural space offers might lead to a setting-specific conclusion (such as a play that is set in a church), the expansion in this case of the notion of space to include the conceptual and congregational transforms an apparent restriction into opportunity. In Patricia Stokes's terminology, what might be perceived as "constraints for conformity" that "hinder novelty" become "constraints for creativity" that act as "barriers that lead to breakthrough" (Stokes, 2005, p.7) in the conceit, creation and production of the work. This effect can also be observed in the physical staging of the play; its scenography and design, as we have seen, offering a dialogue with the framing space of the church.

The conception and writing of *Simeon's Watch* as a piece of site-generic performance might be seen as a model of the way in which the interaction between space and theatre can be transformative to both. It reveals the potentially rich complexities that result when we consider – in Hannah's words – "not what a building is but what it does" (Hannah, 2019, p.1), particularly so when its function is expressed through human activity within and in relationship to its space. This is the "transference" that Hannah identifies as the result of "a mutual relationship between architecture and audience as well as architecture and performance"

(Hannah, p.1). Winding those performance relationships further back into the creative process and timeline in order to include the way in which the creation of text might be informed and even shaped by architectural space offers scholars areas of consideration and of further investigation. For practitioners – writers, directors and commissioners – the potential offered by creating dramatic work in response to and relationship with architecture is a field rich with future possibility.

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