<u>Learning to Write Spaces.</u>

It is frequently suggested to new playwrights that you 'have to know the rules in order to break them'. This suggestion relies on the idea that theatre audiences share certain expectations of how language works in the theatre. However, it can be argued that different audiences bring different expectations, and that theatre is increasingly entering into new arenas and disciplinary collaborations, where dramatic 'rules' are contaminated by, or superseded by other compositional principles. I will propose that site-specificity is not only a symptom of this situation, but may be a useful pedagogical tool in facilitating a writer's route into engaging with visual and spatial principles of composition.

David Edgar usefully clarifies the significance of the 'rules':

> ...the argument that one should know the rules in order to break them is only half the story. Playwrights should know the rules because they are the possession of the audience, their essential partner in the endeavour.[1]

The audience brings its expectations and knowledge of dramatic convention to the theatre, and Edgar suggests, these 'can be fulfilled or broken but not ignored'.[2] On the other hand, as theatre becomes an increasingly interdisciplinary form, where the boundaries between theatre and live art are frequently indistinct, this insistence on 'the rules' is problematic where it assumes that all theatrical presentation is rooted in drama. Where contemporary work takes its inspiration from conceptual and live art, 'the rules' of drama may turn out to have more limited relevance and reference to different approaches may be necessary.

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[1] David Edgar, *How Plays Work* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), p.7.
[2] Ibid., p.9.

These approaches may be additional, rather than substitute principles, expanding the range of compositional strategies available to the writer.

Recently, my interest in the diversity of contemporary theatre writing led me to research the possibility for bringing very different writers into dialogue, each offering an individual response to that dialogue. My project, 'Writing Space' (2008) brought together eight writers spanning playwriting, adaptation, autobiographical performance, performance writing, site-specific performance and community theatre.[3] Each writer led or gave an hour-long discussion, workshop, paper or performance and subsequently, each writer contributed a short script for performance by students.[4] At the end of the project, it was apparent that the sheer diversity of the texts, as well as the fact that each was written for a group of three to five students, made them an extremely useful resource for introducing students to the breadth of contemporary writing for performance, as well as the specific strategies, concerns and forms that underpinned each work.

However, where students have been taught to consider the play-script in terms of plot, narrative and character, it can be a difficult transition to consider a performance text in terms of concept, rhythm, juxtaposition, space and figure. In order to illustrate this, I will initially discuss the ways in which students have responded to the script submitted by playwright, novelist and critic Claire MacDonald, which consists of a series of instructions and questions for performers, prompting them to make a performance score. For example:

1. Answer these:

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[3] This project is well documented in *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 30 (Spring 2010), which contains most of the performance texts, two presentations, a student interview and a discussion of the project, alongside other, contextual material.
[4] Stacy Makishi asked to perform her own text, and this was agreed.

What do you like to do in bed other than sleeping?

What do you like to wear in bed?

What's the most unusual place you have ever slept?

Where do you sleep now?

How much do you sleep?

Do you dream?

Do you remember your dreams?

What did you dream about last night?

Have dreams ever come true for you?

Do you daydream?

Do dreams have meanings?[5]

MacDonald comments that this 'play': 'returns questions of agency and authorship to the players'. It does not prescribe length, narrative, drama or content. Her introduction refers us to the 20th century performance work that grew out of the expansion of music by John Cage and the Fluxus artists, not only in their re-examination of everyday actions, but also in their use of instructions or 'scores' 'that encouraged the players to bring their own repertoire of memories or imagined memories' to the repeatable, but endlessly variable realisation of the proposal. She writes that, 'As in a Fluxus score or a Cage piece, such as his *Europera* series, the piece will be different each time, and its content will be determined by the players themselves.'[6] She also makes reference to the conceptual art of Tracy Emin and to writer William S. Burroughs' notion of 'machines for writing'. Bertolt Brecht is fleetingly mentioned, in relation to the notion of the *Lehrstück*, or 'teaching play': 'As in *Lehrstücke*, the text is open to adaptation, modification and critique. It's "learning" is

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[5] Claire Macdonald, '*In Bed*', *Studies in Theatre and Performance,* 30 (Spring 2010), 59-62, (p.61).
[6] Ibid, p.59.

aimed at the players'[7]. Drama, therefore, is not excluded from consideration, but the frame of reference is considerably wider than this, and dramatic principles are not the most significant.

As part of the Writing Space project, a group of four students were given the piece to perform. While the students were ready to offer autobiographical material with disarming frankness and playfulness, we were surprised that they largely retained the sequence of the instructions and questions, making them part of the spoken text. The result was that these formed a template for the script.

Afterwards, the project's writers suggested that the students had not known how to create a score. As they were first years, this was not altogether unlikely, but I suspected that without a written text (i.e. if they had been given spoken, rather than written suggestions), they might not have treated the material in the same way. The students observed that the text states that any of the questions and suggestions can be spoken within the performance and defended their choice to do so. Initially, I accepted this position, as they were correct in identifying this as one of many legitimate strategies.

When I gave the same text to two groups of second-year performers, this time as part of a live art module (2009), I was surprised to find that they also treated the text as if it were a narrative script, despite my use of MacDonald's introduction and other careful framing. This time, I had seen evidence that the group was capable of structuring devised work according to a non-linear logic and would not be unduly challenged by the idea of being without a script. Yet both the two second-year groups also treated the text as a structural

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[7] Ibid, p.60.

template for the performance, allowing it to dictate the 'narrative' of their work – something that was not implicit in the text itself.

It appeared that the form of the written text was prompting the students to react as though they had been given a play to perform, even though the text resists such conventions. Their response suggests habits of analysis, but also reveals why even students who can create complex devising structures can struggle with reading or writing a performance text that does not conform to the presumed 'rules' of playwriting.

In effect, they shared the expectations Edgar identifies as belonging to the theatre audience. They responded to the performance text as a play, with its foundations in drama. Yet, as students on a Performing Arts course, oriented towards devised work, they did not have these expectations of all theatrical performance. It appeared that the framework of the written page itself raised expectations of the dramatic form. On the other hand, the group was not extraordinarily conservative and had no qualms about adding new material or unexpected staging; it was rather that they looked to the text to provide a sequential logic for their performance. This amounted to looking for linearity within the text, perhaps even for narrative of a kind. A deep-seated habit of looking for time-based structures within dramatic writing led them to seek one where it was not proposed.[8]

It could be suggested that they continued to imbue the text with an authority and a structural precedence that it does not assert. Yet this is not an adequate expression of the problem, for it was not that the students needed less deference to the text, but rather that this text invites you to treat it differently. Nevertheless, hierarchies are implicated. As

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[8] I should acknowledge that *In Bed* was based on MacDonald's more successful work with students at George Mason University, where she led a performance project that provided some of the material for her text. She discusses it in her essay, 'Conducting the flow: Dramaturgy and Writing', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* (Spring, 2010) 91-100. These were not 'Drama' students, however, and a different set of challenges was present.

Fuchs and Chaudhuri point out, within modernist and postmodernist performance, 'A pervasive new spatiality...has turned Aristotelian hierarchy on its head: now spectacle may be the "soul" of the dramatic enterprise'.[9] They go on to suggest that, 'Landscape names the modern theatre's new spatial paradigm'.[10] MacDonald's text generates new writing around the space of a bed, or beds, prompted by questions. It does not provide a narrative of questions. It is, as MacDonald says, 'all *mise-en-scène*. All context'.[11] Even the fact that I provided each group with bed-sheets did not provoke them to engage with the bed as arena, or the 'blank sheet' as surface on which text might be spatially composed.

Gertrude Stein, the seminal early modernist writer, first articulates a desire to write text in which the spatial dynamic takes precedence over linear or narrative logic. She contemplates the possibility of a play that would be rather like a painting or a landscape. She describes the quality of a landscape, as:

> ...not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway. And of that relation I wanted to make a play and I did, a great number of plays.[12]

This is a view of performance as a field of relationships, a dynamic that becomes more significant than sequential action or meaning. Stein is less concerned with the depiction of space than with spatial configurations within language itself. So, for instance, we often find

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[9] Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (eds.), *Land/Scape/Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p.2.
[10] Ibid., p.2.
[11] Macdonald, '*In Bed*', p.59.
[12] Gertrude Stein, 'Plays', *Lectures in America* (London: Virago, 1988), p.122.

words arranged according to rhythm, pattern, echo and juxtaposition, rather than sequential meaning, tending towards a musical and choric exploration of language:

Saint Therese. How many saints are there in it.

Saint Therese. There are very many many saints in it.

Saint Therese. There are as many saints as there are in it.

Saint Therese. How many saints are there in it.

Saint Therese. There are there are there are saints saints in it.[13]

The relationship of language to spatial design and literal landscape is relevant, however, in work by Stein-influenced directors such as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. Wilson's work with language is, like Stein's, musical in many respects, but he also uses space and image as structuring elements. For instance, in the 1972 performance, *Ka Mountain and GUARDenia Terrace*, sixty sketches were dispersed across seven Iranian hills and seven days. The scale of both space and time necessitated an assemblage of fragments in a sprawling 'mega-structure', a broad narrative arc, containing contributions by various authors. In contrast, Wilson's stage works are often based on a text, but tend to crystallise language into images, within a visual structure.

Stein mentions painting and such spatial approaches are informed by the visual arts. Stephen Di Benedetto clarifies the implications for the spectator, in an article that focuses on Wilson's *H.G.* (1995):

Live Artists demand that the spectator utilize some of the skills normally associated with viewing an art object...whose component parts unfold over the duration of the

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[13] Gertrude Stein, 'Four Saints in Three Acts', *Operas and Plays* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1987 (1932)), pp.11-47, (p.28).

production. Therefore, the sum of all compositional parts becomes the whole...The visual not only augments the text through physical illustration, but can also use it as a principal component to elicit or convey visual rhetoric through the construction of images as its mode of expression.[14]

Thus, such works can cause confusion in those who are schooled in the dramatic form, if they expect a relationship between text and performance in which text provides a narrative framework and underpins all other elements. Works by Wilson, for example, often require the viewer, reader or writer to abandon or expand such dramaturgical expectations to include notions of text as visual or musical element, rather than as bearer of semantic meaning, and certainly to consider 'visual rhetoric' as dramaturgically central. This is one of the challenges inherent in teaching performance writing, particularly to theatre students.

The tendency for recent theatre to use text as 'landscape' or to exploit its musical, rhythmic and choric possibilities has been well observed. For instance, Hans-Thies Lehmann discusses it at length in an article of 1997[15] and later, in explicating some of the features of what he terms 'postdramatic' theatre, refers to Elinor Fuchs' chapter, 'Another version of Pastoral' in her 1996 book, *The Death of Character*, where she writes:

I experimentally suggest that a performance genre has emerged that encourages or relies on the faculty of landscape surveyal. It's structures are arranged not in lines of conflict and resolution but on multivalent spatial relationships, "the trees to the hills

[14] Stephen Di Benedetto, 'Stumbling in the Dark: Facets of Sensory Perception and Robert Wilson's 'H.G.' Installation', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 17 (Autumn 2001), 273-84, (p. 283).
[15] See, for example, Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'From Logos to Landscape: Text in Contemporary Dramaturgy', *Performance Research*, 2.1., (1997), pp.55-61.

the hills to the fields...any piece of it to any sky", as Stein said, "any detail to any other detail".[16]

Fuchs, then, prompts or confirms Lehmann's observation of such compositional strategies in theatre that breaks with dramatic tradition (the 'postdramatic'). However, although Fuchs explicitly identifies two writers within her discussion - and Lehmann does not exclude them - this is something that has rarely been discussed in relation to its implications for teaching playwrights. This is partly, I think, because text is assumed to be diminished as visual, sonic and kinetic elements gain significance. Patrice Pavis suggests, rightly, that within this vision of theatre 'text no longer enjoys an anterior or exclusive status; it is only one of a number of performance materials.'[17] Yet while the importance of text cannot be taken for granted, this does not necessarily imply that sophisticated textual work cannot be undertaken in relationship to other theatrical elements, or that text is invariably marginalised within such a context.

As we have seen, Fuchs herself recognises 'landscape' as relevant to the discussion of playwrights as well as directors. Her discussion of 'pastoral' in her earlier book provides some of the ideas that underpin her co-edited work with Una Chaudhuri, *Land/Scape/Theater*, which discusses 'modern theater's increasingly spatialized aesthetic and its engagement with the cultural meanings of place and space'[18]. The book, which ranges across diverse elements of modern theatre, deliberately includes play texts. Pointing this out, the authors are unusual in identifying the need to engage closely with the ways in which text is not merely subsumed into the 'landscape' of the production, but

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[16] Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 106-7. Fuchs' chapter elaborates this idea, basing the discussion on Maurice Maeterlinck, Gertrude Stein, Robert Wilson, Reza Abdoh, Richard Foreman and Elizabeth Lecompte, Suzan Lori-Parks and Charles Mee. This is quoted and discussed in Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York:Routledge, 2006), p.81.
[17] Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film*, trans. by David Williams (4 edn.; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p.205.
[18] Fuchs and Chaudhuri (Eds.) *Land/Scape/Theater*, back cover.

itself participates in the move away from dramatic narrative and towards a spatialisation of the theatre event, in the spaces of its own construction as well as its thematic preoccupations:

> It is not "news", after all, to informed students of theater, that field, or landscape staging has been the dominant directorial approach of the postrealist theater, whether proscenium, environmental, or site specific...What is more difficult to discern, and therefore more important to theorize, is the landscape in the text...it is the spatial turn, not simply in the literal or naive space of the visible theater, but within and surrounding text itself, that needs to be brought to light.[19]

If this is difficult for the critic, no wonder it is also difficult for the student. It requires one, for example, to be able to see how the aerial view of a continent which is implicit in David Greig's drama, *Europe* (1994), is linked to the 'sound field' created by Hans Peter Kuhn for Wilson's site-specific *H.G.*, and to the durational, non-narrative texts of Forced Entertainment's *Speak Bitterness* (1995).[20] In each of these works, text becomes engaged in mapping a field, literally or figuratively. In Wilson and Kuhn's work it is one element in a soundscape; in Forced Entertainment's work, a linguistic field (that of the confessional mode) is explored; in Greig's work, there is a tension between the narrative's dis-used station and the sense of a dynamic, fluid space across and beyond the border, where other things are happening. Within such work, space and landscape are sometimes literal thematics; sometimes structuring principles and frequently both.[21]

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[19] Fuchs and Chaudhuri (eds.), *Land/Scape/Theater*, p.6.
[20] Having already introduced *H.G.* I have chosen other examples from 1994-5 to emphasise their propinquity, rather than because this year is especially significant.
[21] Fuchs discusses the relationship between a literal concern with landscape and a concern with spatial structures at many points in 'Another Version of Pastoral', *The Death of Character* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996), pp.92-107.

MacDonald's text is similar, in that it invites a mapping of the bed as both literal and figurative terrain. While narrative and time-based structures can be accommodated in its staging, the starting point is a field of enquiry, not a given narrative.

How, then, to encourage students to grasp this shift in reading and writing practices? Rather than propose that students attempt to grasp 'the spatial turn...within and surrounding text itself' in purely theoretical terms, or, necessarily, though a sudden immersion in Stein, I have found that site-specific experimentation is often a simple way of propelling students towards a spatial understanding of text and performance, disarming them of assumptions of narrative centrality (though there is, of course, potential for narrative within a structure that has a predominantly spatial logic, and vice versa, as Greig demonstrates).

This is precisely the way in which my own practice evolved from writing plays into different forms of performance writing which now range from installation to guidebook to performance walks to signposts. In my first attempts at site-specific work, in 1998, I was true to my drama education and brought together a series of narratives connected by place.[22] However, it became evident that such work, while not without its value, turned every space into a theatre, reducing it to the status of container for the narrative. This observation pushed me, together with the other members of the company, Wrights & Sites, to theorise our work and to clarify plans for the future.

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[22] Cathy Turner, *The Bell*, site-specific performance in Exeter's former maritime museum and warehouse, as part of *The Quay Thing*, season of site-specific performance, Wrights & Sites, Jun-August 2008. The piece was devised with Cath Church, Jill Dowse, Jo Loyn and Patrick Morris.

At the launch of the book documenting this first project,[23] I referenced the work of Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas's company Brith Gof, as I identified:

> ...the tension in art between what is 'of me' and 'not of me'... Brith Gof talk about the 'host' site as opposed to the 'ghost' of the performance event. The real host site (with all its indigenous performances) is linked to the ghostly work we bring to it and vice versa. But it isn't the same thing.[24]

Site-specific performance invites an awareness of how our words and actions relate to the spaces they inhabit and the resonances between the architectures of the site and the architectonics of the text. It is not enough that the site contains the text: the two are inter-related.

These kinds of speculations gradually led Wrights & Sites to consider ways of taking the (imaginary) theatre building out of site-specific theatre, and from there to the creation of suggestions for walkers, contained in published 'Mis-Guides'.[25]It has been a long journey (sometimes literally), now moving into public art works and 'ambulant architectures'.

While relevant to my own work, it is not the purpose of this article to discuss those elements of site-specific work that include a forensic, or 'archaeological'[26] investigation of a place. This kind of exploration is not unrelated to the work I describe below, but it is not a

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[23] Wrights & Sites, *Site-Specific:* The Quay Thing *Documented*, Supplement 5, *Studies in Theatre and Performance* (Wrights & Sites, Exeter, 2000).

[24] Cathy Turner, unpublished and untitled text read at launch of *Site-Specific: The Quay Thing Documented*, Exeter's Former Maritime Museum, 2000.

25 See www.mis-guide.com.

[26] See Mike Pearson, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge 2001). Also see Wrights & Sites, 'A Stratigraphy of Place: Everything You Need to Build a Town is Here', in Paul Graves-Brown, Rodney Harrison and Angela Piccini (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2012).

very significant feature of it. What I am more concerned with here, is the need for text to map onto and inhabit a chosen site, and thus to engage with situation and spatial structure rather than, or more usually alongside narrative and time-based structure. The re-configuration of audience experience is also a factor in reconceptualising the text.

Given my own background, it is not surprising that one of my first attempts at teaching a course in 'Performance Writing' involved an emphasis on space and place. In particular, at the culmination of the course, when students approached the creation of works for an invited audience, I specifically used place as a means whereby to discourage them from habits of linear, dramatised narrative and towards a spatialised textuality. Each student was allocated a room in a private house, together with a short list of instructions. For instance, one student was required to write on the walls; another was required to use sound recording; another to use video. The theme was to explore the idea of 'home' at that time of year (November) in their home countries (which included Thailand, the United States and Oman).

This resulted in a series of autobiographical texts that were both performed and mapped onto the spaces of this Devon terraced house. The more explicitly autobiographical they were, the more we experienced the tensions within this relationship and the gaps between the often touching accounts of their lives and the visitor's or audience's capacity fully to grasp what was described. Dee Heddon was later to coin the term 'autotopography', to describe works that write 'place through self (and simultaneously...self through place)', identifying a range of works that have investigated the relationship between autobiography and specific or generic sites. These student pieces of 2001 were 'autotopographical' performances in which, as Heddon puts it, 'perspective is foregrounded in a way that

distinguishes it from dominant (contemporary and Western) forms of mapping. This sort of mapping also allows you to "write" the unknown or unrecognised route' .[27]

It was fascinating to observe that in these works, the text had become material, to be stitched into patchwork, written on walls and in cupboards, blown across the floor, projected, emergent as sound and written in lime juice. It was also spoken. The text took up space, in every sense.

To return to my more recent work with Winchester's live art groups, I set them an exercise in which they were asked to write and perform a text for the space of a window in the Exam Hall – a space which could be considered analogous to the bed-sheets required for MacDonald's text. The students, in this instance, were immediately able to comprehend that the dynamics of the room might be a structuring principle. Writing texts on the windows, shouting them from outside to inside, even acting a scene which relied on the inside/outside tensions of being seated at an exam, these performances were diverse, but similar in that the dynamic of inside/outside, visuality/obscurity, was vividly present in the text itself. One of the simplest of these pieces involved the performers in describing the traces of a mirroring doorway on the wall behind the audience. The audience, instructed not to turn their heads, became very aware of the distance between spoken description and visual evidence. The performers' careful description teased us, pointing up the cursoriness of our former looking, drawing attention to the void opposite the framing window 'stage' and behind our backs. While their language did not break with sequential organisation, their text was founded on the spatial dynamic between seen and unseen, rather than on time-based action or the playing out of a narrative relationship between characters.

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[27] Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p.91.

Site-specificity is not an exclusive method for approaching the problems I have identified. An exploration of text in the visual arts would be likely to nurture similar approaches by considering its relationship, antithetical or not, with three-dimensional space and the material art object. It might also push beyond this to an exploration of the spaces of the text and page itself, as in work ranging from the Futurist, F.T.Marinetti's 'Words in Freedom (1915) to Chinese artist Xu Bing's 'Square Word Calligraphy' at the close of the millennium.[28] One could also explore the spatial dimensions of the shifting perspectives apparent in 'performative writing'[29]. However, by suggesting that the chosen space or place is central, site-specific performance makes it self-evident that in this instance, the writing needs to enter into the spatial exploration.

A 'spatial' logic is not necessarily preferable, or opposed to, a 'linear' one. It is precisely the exploration of physical space in relation to narrative time and *vice versa* that interests me and has led to an exploration of cross-disciplinary approaches to architecture, cultural geography and performance. However, when introducing students to modes of writing that emerge from live art traditions or that build on a modernist fascination with the visual and spatial, it may be important to facilitate this shift from the deep-seated association of language with narrative, towards a better understanding of its spatial dynamics.

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[28] This is a way of writing English words to look like Chinese calligraphy, which is taught to in order to introduce a 'process of estrangement and re-familiarization with one's written language, the audience is reminded that the sensation of distance between other systems of language and one's own is largely self-induced,' artist's website, 'Square Calligraphy Classroom, 1994', http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1994/square_calligraphy_classroom [accessed 25 Nov 2011], (para. 2 of 2).

[29] See, for example, Della Pollock, 'Performing Writing' in Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (Eds.), *The Ends of Performance* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), pp.73-103.

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