

INTIMATE AND EPIC

The affects and effects of regional environment on
Kneehigh Theatre's creative development processes.

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- As Scholar in Residence at QPAC and in leadership roles in the cultural sector, **Professor McLean**'s work speaks to her democratic interest in the role the arts play in contributing to the enrichment of communities, creating more connected and compassionate societies.
- As Professor and Assistant Dean for the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, **Professor Haseman** has extensive theoretical and practical knowledge of a broad range of contemporary theatre practices and influences. His roles with The Australia Council as Chair of the Community Partnerships Committee and Arts Practice, Capacity Building make Professor Haseman an authority on the role of arts policy in Australia's cultural life.

CONTEXT

My research question

As long as humans have communicated by leaving marks, mark-makers have sought to interpret natural phenomena. The visceral experience of extreme weather, a powerful landscape or a sky full of stars can still reconnect even the most urban of creatures with a long-lost wildness and the “quality of greatness or grandeur that inspires awe and wonder” described as the Sublime¹.

My research question focuses on one small facet of the complex and incalculably vast global body - created over millennia - of nature-inspired artworks, literature, music, performance and philosophy that evidence the hardwired currents flowing between human and environment:

“How do the effects and affects of regional environments impact upon creative development processes devised by the director?”

This is a question to which Cornwall’s celebrated Kneehigh Theatre has, over its thirty-year evolution, proposed some compelling answers. This globally renowned company is based in Truro, a city the size of Lismore, on the West Coast of the UK.

Having founded the company in 1980 Mike Shepherd, one of Kneehigh’s co-artistic directors (the other is Emma Rice, recently appointed Artistic Director for the Globe Theatre, London), has guided Kneehigh through its evolution from a raffish bunch of local actors to a company of national and international acclaim. For over three decades Kneehigh’s directors and teams have “held their nerve” (to use one of Mike’s phrases) to maintain their distinctive way of theatre making as a fundamental artistic priority and a way of retaining the company’s regional identity.

As exemplars of excellence in regional practice, Kneehigh Theatre provides a global benchmark for the purposes of my research. A period of ethnographical field study in Truro with Kneehigh is one stream of a hybrid methodological approach to the research question, and is planned for early 2016. In parallel, using auto-ethnographical and forensic reflection methodologies I aim to separately document my own creative development processes on two projects in 2016/2017, enabling me to cross-reference these with Kneehigh’s influences and practices.

Three key themes

This essay focuses on material gathered from two initial Skype interviews with Mike. The aim of these interviews was to introduce him to the research question and establish areas of shared interest, and to identify key themes with a) potential for further exploration as part of the research, and b) potential implications for my own practice and c) Australian regional practice more broadly.

Quotes from my interviews with Mike, those in indented paragraphs throughout this essay, animate three key emerging themes with fascinating resonances for all of the above:

¹ The Art of the Sublime, Tate Gallery Research Project January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/>.

1. THE ELEMENTS – how weather and other elemental forces affect the Kneehigh creative processes and outcomes.
2. WORKING IN COMPANY – how Kneehigh seeks to create a culture of shared purpose and shared adventure.
3. THE CHARGED SPACE – The importance to Kneehigh of creating and nurturing an environment where the work can “live”.

Defining “regional”

Qualitative markers of regionality include concepts of identity, values, and connections inextricably linked to place. This is a rich area of exploration, however not dealt with in this essay.

The independent regional research and advocacy body the Regional Australia Institute use the following definition, in which Darwin and Hobart would count as regional centres. For the purposes of this essay, it will suffice as a descriptor in both UK and Australian contexts.

*Regional Australia is a term used to refer to the non-metropolitan areas of the nation that lie beyond the major capital cities and their immediate surrounding suburbs.*²

INTRODUCTION

Skype call #1 with Mike Shepherd - 9am UK time, Tuesday June 15, 2015

Co-artistic directors Mike Shepherd and Emma Rice have just begun creating Kneehigh’s latest show, 946, in the remote barns on the South Cornwall coast where the company develop all their productions before taking them out to the world. The Barns on Dodman Point, once known as Deadman’s Point, are the “charged spaces” to which Mike refers in the company’s 2010 manifesto:

“Kneehigh builds a team for each project. The isolation of the barns, and the need to cook and keep warm provides a real and natural focus for our flights of imagination. This... radical choice informs all aspects of our work. Although much of our work is now co-produced with larger theatres, we always try to start the creative process at these barns, to be inspired by our environment and where we work. These elemental and charged spaces add a physical and vocal robustness to our performance style.”

It is day two of rehearsals. As I’ve never been to The Barns, Mike treats me to a jerky, narrated Skype walk-around. “See, we’re in the country”. Mike’s woolly red jumper and the familiar grey and green of English sky and grass splashes onto the screen. A trombonist is warming up – he waves from the garden, and I can see the fields beyond, in which Kneehigh actors sometimes rehearse. He’s keen to show me the outdoor fire pit where actors and technicians gather in winter for warmth and post-rehearsal wind-down under the stars: “it’s important”, Mike stresses. He walks the laptop into the communal kitchen where meals are prepared and eaten around a long table, pausing at a bright pink wall where large words are chalked: Generosity. Flexibility. Naughtiness. Wonder. Play. Irreverence. Joy. Anarchy. Bravery.

² <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/what-is-regional-australia/>

In the next room there's a production meeting going on. "Say hi to Lindy guys, she's in Australia!" and there's a chorus of morning coffee greetings from my colleagues on the other side of the planet. By comparison, my Brisbane office suddenly seems very un-charged.

THE ELEMENTS

Outdoor performances of music and theatre at contemporary festivals may be as Dionysian as they were in Ancient Athens; they may reach across the span of society as they did in Shakespeare's London. Whether it's Glastonbury, Garma or The Globe, exposure to the elements creates a robust performance dimension and a shared sensory experience for artists and audience that cannot be felt in the comfort of a building.

The resonances between environment and performance are core to the singing, dancing and storytelling on Country that connects a landscape to the maintenance of cultural practice for Indigenous communities.

In site-specific theatre experiences the environment itself is an actor transformed by the encounter with the performance event. Since Peter Brook's nine-hour epic Mahabharata animated a disused quarry fifteen kilometers from Avignon in 1985, a growing audience for site-specific theatre, spectacles and "adventure" outdoor programming has challenged the technical and logistics teams of summertime arts festivals around the world.

Capturing an elemental "robustness" is a key characteristic of Kneehigh's theatre making, whether the work is to be performed indoors or outdoors, or in the company's fully equipped theatre tent, The Asylum, a dome-shaped structure that can be pitched in a variety of scenic locations. As its name suggests, The Asylum offers Kneehigh artists and audiences an authentic outdoor adventure while sheltering them from sun, wind and rain.

Outdoor performances and rehearsals are in the company's DNA. Founded in 1980, Kneehigh's early shows took place in "less conventional places", as their website states³:

"We created theatre on cliff tops, in preaching pits and quarries, amongst gunpowder works and arsenic wastes, up trees, down holes, where the river meets the seas and where woodland footpaths end."

Initially created for outdoor performance, many of Kneehigh's most famous shows are retelling of myths animated in the company's distinctive narrative style, featuring natural light and in particular, the shift from day to night.

"The Red Shoes started outdoors so there was the storytelling element that as dark fell, the actual shape of those stories, Red Shoes, Tristan and Isolde, the story deepens and the emotions deepen with the darkness."

Until The Barns were acquired until 1990, lack of resources and the fact that everyone involved had day jobs in those early days meant that rehearsals were equally elemental:

"We used to work outdoors, and we rehearsed at night, which was kind of magic, obviously it was dark and it was edgy and it was kinda sexy..."

³ http://www.kneehigh.co.uk/page/kneehigh_history.php

The sensuality and wildness of those early outdoor theatre-making experiences is now embedded into the Kneehigh rehearsal process at The Barns:

“We’ll be out on the field, or we’ll mark out the space down on the beach and we’ll run (the show). We get out on the cliffs and we sing and we run.... then there’ll be times when we focus on a more intimate space indoors, so it’s a mixture of the intimate and the epic...”

All the fresh air and the changes of weather and the running about give a natural robustness and rigour physically and vocally. We find it hard in the cities to get peoples’ vocal strength up, and it just happens naturally here.”

Beyond the physical, Mike asserts that an awareness of the environment is key to establishing a psychological state conducive to creativity:

“This place, the Barns, it’s at the end of the United Kingdom, it’s at the end of the road, and it has a massive horizon, which makes you look outwards, it makes you have an open mind, which is important...and quite hard to keep a hold of.”

It’s about getting people to step back a little bit, which they readily do, and they look at that horizon or light that fire, or get their hands dirty or just put a woolly jumper on if it’s getting cold. So they’re the simple elemental things that I mean, really. You’re in a lot of weather. The weather’s changing a lot of the time and you do step back...you eat together...we sit around that fire-pit, you surround yourself with the rudimentary nature of things.”

WORKING IN COMPANY

There is a ritual quality to the way Kneehigh works that bonds the company through shared experience. As Richard Sennett points out in *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, “*Ritual enables expressive cooperation in religion, in the workplace, in politics and in community life*”. The Barns set-up throws artists together into communal scenarios and social rituals of cooking, eating and keeping the fires going. The Kneehigh company ethos of “generosity, flexibility, naughtiness, wonder, play, irreverence, joy, bravery” is captured on a wall in the kitchen where artists, technicians and creative team eat together between rehearsals.

At the end of each day performers, technicians and creative team can walk back to their accommodation close by, or wind down together around the outdoor fire-pit. Colleagues chatting over a beer will inevitably end up discussing the project at hand and, over time, “allowing themselves to become subsumed by the work”. Apart from the practical benefit to the project of extended hours of analysis and problem solving, whether conscious or not, an informal mode of “reflection-in-action” is happening which will inform the next day’s work. Donald Schön’s example of improvising jazz musicians is apt:

As the new musicians feel the direction of the music that is developing out of their interwoven contributions, they make new sense of it and adjust their performance to the new sense they have made. They are reflecting-in-action on the music they are collectively making and on their individual contributions to it, thinking what they are doing, and in the process, evolving their way of doing it.⁴

⁴ Donald Schön: *From Technical Rationality to Reflection-in-Action* Chapter 2

The isolation of the Barns and Kneehigh's communal ethos can be a shock for those accustomed to the pace and distractions of urban life. For many artists the metropolis is their milieu. (I'm reminded of the Woody Allen quote "*I am at two with nature*".) The popularity and national/global demand for Kneehigh shows, industry trends, scheduling demands and budget constraints all present challenges to the continuity, 30 years on, of this way of working. "*The idea of company keeps changing*", Mike observes.

"It is a radical decision. You notice in the cities that people just leave at 6 o'clock - the rehearsal's over. There's a new group of people here...they were kind of mystified that they couldn't immediately get on their phone, because there's no signal."

THE CHARGED SPACE

A literal translation of the Kneehigh vernacular term "the charged space" is elusive, although the notion of charging a battery, of storing electric energy, is helpful. A deeper understanding what is meant by this term is greatly assisted by comparative working experiences of "charged" and "un-charged" spaces, and the affects and effects of these on the creative process for directors and performers.

My own experience as a director creating productions in rehearsal rooms all over the world, is that the question of "charging" the space arises at the beginning of every rehearsal period, but often becomes a failed quest when the architecture or function of the room deadens all efforts to "charge" it. The cavernous Opera Queensland rehearsal studio boasts bright yellow walls, hideous fluorescent lighting and no fresh air, so "charging" that space is a particular challenge.

Whether "at home" in the Barns or The Asylum or on tour, Kneehigh have determinedly made the creative environment and "the charged space" a signature feature of their company's work and ethos.

1. The Barns

By appropriating and converting The Barns, Kneehigh sought to develop an ideal environment for theatre-making. For Mike Shepherd, the "home" Kneehigh has created plays a central role in the creative life of this proudly regional company.

Skype call #2 with Mike Shepherd - 9am UK time, Tuesday July 8, 2015

The 946 company are nearing production week and soon they'll transfer into The Asylum. Mike complains that the noise of the sheep being sheared in the field opposite has been a bit of a distraction. In another Skype walk-around, he shows me how The Barns have been re-purposed:

"We've made it really nice, you see, we put skylights in so there's natural light. It's cosy when it needs to be, like this.... We rehearse in microcosm in here but then, we open the doors and we spread outside and we've got a big tent outside... See, there's the sheep, and the sea's just over that wall...we put a tent up to protect ourselves from the weather."

Before this we'd rehearse anywhere, an old supermarket, old schools...but they were kind of grim, there was always that sense of a place that was evacuated. I really wanted somewhere where we could make home."

In parallel with its growing national and international reputation, the company plays an important role in the local life of the community. Local affection for the company was made clear this month when Mike became the proud recipient of the Cornish "award of awards", the Trelawney Plate, for his leadership of Kneehigh, having been deemed by an anonymous panel to "embody the spirit of Cornwall".

"People love having us here. There was a bloke in the pub the other night, he told me "ooh, we love hearing all the sounds and the music floating down" and there's a general sense of excitement because also we bring different people into the community, so we've become a bit exotic, with all our different nationalities."

Conversely, regional life filters into the rehearsal period. The previous weekend the 946 company had been at a local festival at the nearby fishing village Mevagissey, joining in the fish feast, dancing and fireworks. It's a far cry from the relative detachment of a London rehearsal room:

"We use that quote from Miro "the more local something is, the more it is universal"— that's really important to us. It's in that area of "home". It feeds your soul, feeds your spirit to be part of somewhere. If you wander the corridors of the National Theatre or any other big theatre where everyone just disappears at 5 or 6 o'clock, it's a very different job."

2. The Asylum

Moving from the creative development/rehearsal environment into the performance environment carries with it the risk that certain emotional and tonal qualities developed over weeks – tangible and intangible – may be lost in the translation. Transferring into an "un-charged" theatre or performance environment where the company has little or no control over the audience's experience can be a harsh jolt. One too many bad experiences of this type led to the creation of Kneehigh's traveling theatre, the Asylum.

"It was definitely in response to a lot of theatres not being synonymous with a good night out, a bit stuffy and the bar never being open and the staff being a bit grumpy. I didn't want bricks and mortar, or to run a venue, but I did want us to have more control."

A welcoming atmosphere is at the heart of the "charged space" experience. Volunteers who embrace the Kneehigh ethos staff the Asylum. The actors in the show sometimes serve behind the bar and greet the audience before the show, as I was surprised to discover when I was scoping a performance of *The Red Shoes* in 2010 for Sydney Festival 2011. The Asylum was installed in a field in Truro and the actors, in character, were milling about the entrance in their disconcertingly baggy *Red Shoes* underwear. Once inside the tent, I sat in a nest of second hand sofas and enjoyed delicious Cornish cheese and freshly baked local bread with a glass of local wine, as a cow peered through the doorway. *The Red Shoes* was excellent, a local band played live music afterwards as audience and artists mingled. This charming experience remains a highlight of my time as a festival director.

“People really love the Asylum, it’s part of their annual calendar, there’s a sense of excitement when it’s being put up.”

Theatrically, the large white tent is a work-in-progress. There are acoustic problems still to solve, and several years after its first season, the company is still making modifications.

“The space is epic, it’s kind of like a Cathedral... and you can open it up to the elements, which is good... We quite deliberately haven’t disguised the fact that we’re in a tent. In future we are going to look to “intimise” it, we are going to darken the space as well.”

3. On Tour

Kneehigh's busy touring and co-production schedule means they cannot always work in the Barns or the Asylum. The likelihood of encountering an "un-charged" rehearsal space compels the company to be resourceful.

“You usually get shown to a rehearsal room that is pretty skanky, invariably it’s not clean, there are the signs of previous markups from others shows a bit of paper fluttering around here and there. But whether we’re in Leeds or Liverpool, or wherever we go, people can’t quite believe us because the first thing we do, we spend that first day, if you like, “charging that space”, decorating that space, putting in some ingredients of creativity, so some colour, some nice things to eat, get some fresh air in there, interesting things, to get a toolkit of stuff from which to make a show. Importantly, to work out “what is the space that we’re now going to charge?” where that text can live, or that piece of choreography can live, or you push that prop into the space and suddenly it starts to tell a story cos otherwise it’s all too vague.”

What are the characteristics of a “charged space”?

From my discussions with Mike, I conclude that a space may be said to a “charged” when it is considered:

- Welcoming: clean, friendly, playful, inviting, relaxed and communal. There is music, conversation and laughter. Provision is made for spending time together socially.
- Aesthetically pleasing: You want to spend time there. It is colourful and comfortable.
- Intriguing and stimulating: There’s a story to the space. There are interesting objects, words and reference materials connected to the work at hand.
- Accessible to the elements: There is access to fresh air, bright, natural light and the elements, there are windows and you can go outside if you need to. An outdoor environment may be naturally charged by the elements.
- Robust The space encourages physical robustness and hard work.

Interestingly, none of these characteristics specifically demand a regional environment. Given the amount of time that I myself spend in rehearsal studios, this conversation has made me realise how often I find myself rehearsing in spaces with few, if any, of the above characteristics. Indeed many of Australia’s better-resourced performing arts organisations create their productions in spaces that are utterly functional but could hardly be described as “charged spaces”. Kneehigh’s refreshing perspective on the influence of the creative environment on the director’s processes resonates profoundly with me. I wonder whether my own shows would have been different had they been made in a charged space....

IMPLICATIONS OF OUTCOMES FROM THIS ASSIGNMENT

a) Further research

Immediate further research will focus on a) the impact of landscape and the elements on artists in Australia; including a study of artist's studios b) collaborative theatre making methods elsewhere and their relationship to environment; and c) aesthetic concepts of the Sublime, particularly the Enlightenment writings on aesthetics of Immanuel Kant, including *Critique of Judgement*; and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*.

b) Regional practice, including c) my own practice

Kneehigh's example has already inspired a sharper focus in my own work on the direct impact that environment (the Charged Space) and communal culture (Working In Company) have on the creative development process. Working toward developing a design for the optimum physical, aesthetic, social and practical conditions for creative development work in Australian regional environments will now form part of future phases of this research and my practice in general.

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