

**MOVING INTIMACIES:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF “PHYSICAL THEATRES”
IN FRANCE AND THE UNITED KINGDOM**

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Eugénie Fleur Pastor, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.

Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:  _____

Date: 7 August 2014

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of movement in contemporary “physical theatres”. I develop a renewed understanding of “physical theatres” as embodied framework to experience both spectatorship and theatre-making. I analyse how, in this type of performance, movement blurs distinctions between the intimate and the collective, the inside and the outside, thus challenging definitions of intimacy and tactility.

The thesis consists of a comparative study of examples of “physical theatres”, in the 21st century, in France and in the UK. The comparison highlights that “physical theatres” practitioners are under-represented in France, a reason I attribute in part to a terminological absence in the French language. The four case studies range from itinerant company Escale and their athletic embodiment of a political ideal to Jean Lambert-wild’s theatre of “micro-movement”, from Told by an Idiot’s position in a traditional theatre context in the UK to my own work within Little Bulb Theatre, where physicality is virtuosic in its non-virtuosity. For each case study, I use a methodology that echoes this exploration of movement and reflects my position within each fieldwork. I argue for bilingualism as a methodological tool, and I coin an approach that draws on both a phenomenological perspective and on dance ethnography to take into account the embodied knowledge I acquired through fieldwork. This methodology also allows me to reflect on my own experience as a French “physical theatres”-maker within a British context.

The comparison highlights the conditions, in each context, that enable “physical theatres” to be alternative and potentially subversive. It also suggests

that contemporary “physical theatres” enable an embodied experience that, somatically breaking down perceived boundaries between “self” and “other”, allows a collective intimacy to arise. This in turn suggests potentially subversive modes of organisation and proposes an alternative to dominant ways of making and experiencing theatre.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION: MOVING BETWEEN LANGUAGES, MOVING BEYOND GENRES: A FRANCO-ENGLISH DEFINITION OF “PHYSICAL THEATRES”.

On stage, a man dressed in striped pyjamas, his head shaved and painted red, faces his Doppelgänger. The second man mirrors the exact dress and build of the first character, their silhouettes perfectly matched. The first character seems expectant, ready to react. The second character is walking, blindfolded and guided by a child, through a luxuriant tropical forest. The audience only sees the back of the blindfolded character, and faces the other one, who jumps and jolts at the Doppelgänger’s approach. One moment, they are face-to-face; an instant later, their bodies merge into one: the first character appearing *through* the second. Their silhouettes alternate between thickness and evaporation, between movement and stillness. Both characters are utterly silent. The first man shares the same physical space as the audience: he is present on stage; the blindfolded apparition, on the other hand, is a projection, filmed meandering through the landscape of the island of La Réunion. The first man is the sole physical presence on stage throughout the performance. Or rather, he is the only one who is visible. He seems able to travel from one end of the stage to the other at a surprisingly fast pace; the audience never witnesses his journeys. He also seems prone to vanishing from the stage and reappearing in unlikely locations. Almost as if there were two of them... Despite him apparently being the sole performer on stage, his physicality is often minimal and on occasion infinitesimal. He is almost immobile, yet constantly moving.

La Mort d'Adam (2010) is a show by French theatre maverick Jean Lambert-wild, who claims that the piece is semi-autobiographical (“Interview” 2010). The production interweaves narrative layers that echo one another: a heavily poetic text, authored by Lambert-wild and that actress-cum-storyteller Bénédicte Debilly utters into a microphone from an armchair at the side of the stage; footage of Lambert-wild’s “clown”, a persona who appears throughout Lambert-wild’s oeuvre and who is embodied on this occasion by American mime artist Jeremiah McDonald, seen wandering blindfolded through the forests and deserts of La Réunion;¹ an electro-acoustic musical score performed live; and a silent physical score performed by McDonald and by Lambert-wild. Each layer reflects and echoes every other one, constructing a narrative across mediums and generating a thick, dense sensory experience. What strikes in *La Mort d'Adam* is, first, the relative stillness of the performers. It is a live performance, the spectator’s senses are inundated with wave after wave of stimuli, and yet, taken separately, each element of the production is almost static: Debilly does not leave her velvet armchair and McDonald’s physical score is composed of “micro-movement”. Yet, the whole performance is dynamised by a constant underlying current.

It might seem contradictory to open this thesis, dedicated to exploring movement in “physical theatres”, with an example that so intensely draws attention to stillness. This scene however encapsulates key questions that this project is concerned with, and it illustrates the kind of microscopic analysis I undertake throughout. Immobility, for example, calls for a recalibration of the

¹ La Réunion is a “Département d’Outre-Mer”. One of France’s former colonies, it has had, since 1946, the same status as any mainland “département” (the geographical equivalent of the British “county”). It is located in the southwestern part of the Indian Ocean, west of Madagascar. The geography of La Réunion is characterised by several volcanoes, including the still active Piton de la Fournaise.

notion of “movement”: physical movements on stage are not limited, in this thesis, to the spectacular or the virtuosic. Movement also encompasses stillness, the idea that physicality in motion can be felt in a performer’s apparent immobility. Throughout this study, movement and physicality are understood within a spectrum that ranges from microscopic movement to breathtakingly acrobatic aerial acts. Movement is also used in this thesis metaphorically, as a critical device. The multiplications of the “clown” for instance, at times embodied by McDonald and at times by Lambert-wild, are produced by a movement that diffracts one’s individuality into a multitude of Doppelgangers. This scene also challenges the idea of intimacy as being one’s less shared realm, not least in the way one’s individuality is multiplied through different mediums and distributed between different performers. *La Mort d’Adam*, presented as semi-autobiographic, is indeed performed by a man who is not the autobiographer. What does it mean for McDonald who is simultaneously performing himself – the mysterious American mime artist credited in the programme – and someone else’s fantasy of themselves – Lambert-wild’s fantasised alter ego, the “clown”? Space too is diffracted: protean, it becomes several spaces concertinaed into one another. They open up or disappear: the forest becomes volcano and ocean, the stage turns into a prison cell or a beach. In addition, Lambert-wild’s text vividly superimposes yet other spaces through the use of metaphors. What is the effect of this superimposition of theatrical spaces? What are the consequences of such a spatial reversing that reveals or hides secret realms? This constant movement blurs distinctions between the different theatrical spaces: between the stage and the projections, actual and virtual places, imaginary and geographical landscapes, and the intimate and the open.

A Comparative Study of Intimacy in Movement

This thesis explores how movement, understood physically and metaphorically, can generate alternative, and occasionally subversive, ways of making and experiencing “physical theatres” by questioning and challenging notions of intimacy. Blurring distinctions between the intimate and the collective, the inside and the outside, the closed and the open, these “physical theatres” allow novel parameters for an experience of performance to emerge. I also examine how the spaces at work in these “physical theatres” are set in motion and explored in a way that challenges strict boundaries. The thesis does not intend to provide novel techniques or methodologies for making “physical theatres”, nor do I suggest that the practitioners I examine would necessarily speak of their work in these terms. Instead, I explore how a focus on movement triggers a fluid and active mode of experience for audience members and performers alike, who are invited to actively participate, at a somatic level. In this respect, I develop on, and reconstruct, ideas of “physical theatres” as tools for an embodied experience of theatre practice and spectatorship. This is echoed by, and feeds into, the development of a critical perspective that takes into account such fluidity. I thus develop what I define as a bilingual critical approach that allows processes of *alienation* to take place, both ideas I will define shortly. In this respect, a focus on movement and on intimacy also informs the methodology used to analyse these case studies and to reflectively write about them.

Comparing contemporary examples drawn from France and the United Kingdom highlights that “physical theatres” have become ubiquitous in the latter whereas they remain invisible in the former. I do not suggest that “physical

theatres” are absent from the French cultural landscape; rather, that they are not theorised and represented as such, a dimension that I argue locates their existence on artistic, critical and/or terminological margins. Looking at these practices through a “physical theatres” prism, I provide a critical framework to examine an area of French theatre that remains largely unmapped. The comparison also highlights what elements of the one and the other context allow “physical theatres” to be potentially alternative or subversive.

Throughout the thesis, the terms “alternative” and “subversive” are understood in their common usage. The former refers to what the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* describes as “another possibility”, but also “of or relating to activities that depart from or challenge traditional norms” (39). I also use the term to encompass practices that operate outside what can be perceived as the mainstream: as evoked by Baz Kershaw, “alternative” theatre has historically been used to “indicate broad opposition to the ideological mainstream in theatre and politics” (“Alternative Theatres” 350). The term is also often used alongside “experimental” or “fringe”. As I will analyse later, a definition of what constitutes the “mainstream”, and whether such a definition is even necessary, is not self-evident, especially in the British context. Some of the alternative “physical theatres” I examine in this thesis are also “subversive”. I understand the term etymologically: coming from the Latin *subvertere*, from *sub-*, “from below” and *vertere* “to turn”. In this respect, subversive “physical theatres” “undermine the power and authority of (an established system or institution)” (*Concise* 1431). They are performance practices that capsize and overturn modes of theatre-making, and suggest an altogether different way of experiencing theatre.

Intimacy as embodiment and proximity

This thesis delineates an area of theatre practice that enables an alternative understanding of performance-making and spectatorship, challenging notions of intimacy on a metaphorical and a somatic level. As I develop in chapter 2, these questions are reflected in the methodological framework coined in this thesis that takes into account a corporeal and emotional intimacy.

In a sociological framework, and in the cultural contexts where the “physical theatres” I examine are made, intimacy is defined as what is personal, private, and the expression of one’s subjectivity. It encompasses in this respect what Alan Read terms a “proximity of relations” (1), that is, a relational dimension where intimacy is defined by *who* and *what* participates in it. In a similar vein, the French sociologist Henri-Pierre Jeudy defines intimacy as “ce qui est en opposition avec ce qui est public” (13):² what is only made available to a chosen few. Jeudy also understands intimacy as what he terms, paraphrasing the poet Henri Michaux, an “espace du dedans” (8): an imaginary space (8) built upon and from psychical “survital” mechanisms (16).³ As an imaginary and socially constructed dimension, intimacy is defined as what is concealed, unspoken of, hidden. It is also represented in spatial terms: it is “plus une forme qu’un contenu” (24), an “enveloppe de la cachette” (17).⁴ This definition suggests that what is contained within intimacy is constantly renewed and replaced: when a secret is revealed, it is replaced by another one, making intimacy processual. In this definition, the intimate, characterised as an ‘inside’, is in opposition with an ‘outside’.

² “What is in opposition with what is public”.

³ “Space within”; “survital” is a neologism coined from “survie”: survival and “vital”. It evokes a mechanism essential for one’s survival.

⁴ “More form than content”; “a shell of what is hidden”.

In recent years, experimental performance practices have been increasingly interested in exploring and representing intimacy, through for instance what Deirdre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rebecca Zerihan call “performances of intimacy” (126). In an article on One-to-One performance, the authors acknowledge this surge of interest as “contextually related to wider cultural concerns around inter-subjectivity, anxieties over how – in a world of inter-racial and inter-ethnic conflicts and global inequalities and injustices – we might live together, better” (126). Exploring the question of intimacy and a concern for subjectivity in wider performance contexts than the one allowed by One-to-One performance highlights that there exists a similar interest in other areas of the performing arts. Intimacy in this thesis is therefore explored through two concomitant perspectives: on the one hand, I examine how “physical theatres” propose an alternative definition that encompasses the collective, and reverses the notions of “inside” and “outside” that inform a Western understanding of intimacy. On the other hand, intimacy understood as emotional, physical and processual subjectivity informs the grounding of this thesis in an account of “physical theatres” from both an audience perspective and a practitioner perspective. As I develop in the chapter on Methodology, I examine these questions using a framework that combines dance ethnography and a perspective inspired by phenomenology. Importantly, these two methodological strands are grounded in an awareness of the researcher’s embodied intimacy. In this respect, intimacy as it is understood here integrates a somatic dimension of performance, both on the giving end, from the practitioner’s perspective, and the receiving end, from an audience member’s perspective. This question is explored

through the way one experiences performance: how one is *moved* and responds to the moving bodies evolving on stage.

Because it crystallises these key questions, the example of Bénédicte Debilly's voice is particularly useful at this introductory stage. The attention given to her microscopic and inner physicality, the display of gestures usually relegated to one's most internal realms, question ideas of intimacy. As I explore in Chapter 4, the way Debilly's voice is amplified in *La Mort d'Adam* brings attention to sounds and movement that usually remain secret: the movement of the tongue in the mouth, of the air through the lungs. In this example, it is the sound and the movement of Debilly's inner organs that can be heard in the theatre space. This movement of reversal, where the boundary between "inside" and "outside" is blurred, transforms the theatre space in an intimate space. Amplification also transforms Debilly's voice into "voice-as-gesture", giving it a tactile quality. The question of touch, tactility and how it connects with movement and intimacy constitutes an important aspect of this thesis, both on a methodological and a thematic level. To examine these questions, I use a framework that draws on recent work on tactility, focusing especially on perspectives developed by Mark Paterson on the one hand, and Sally Ann Ness on the other. Both allow an understanding of touch as connecting to a deeper physical, fleshed intimacy. Both also develop an understanding of touch as challenging clear delineations between self and other, inside and outside.

Mark Paterson's definition of the "haptic", as he develops in "Haptic Geographies: Ethnography, Haptic Knowledges and Sensuous Dispositions", suggests "a kind of touch that extends beyond straightforward ... cutaneous touch". Paterson continues saying that "the term "haptic" is therefore applied

more extensively to include internally felt bodily sensations” (768). In this respect, a “haptic” dimension of touch suggests an alternative definition of intimacy, especially for the way, in Paterson’s words, it problematises the “common conception of a cutaneous subject ... enveloped ... by skin”, something Paterson argues “has no neuropsychological basis” (780). In fact, Paterson suggests:

The distribution of nerves throughout the body elides any neat distinction between interoception and exteroception in the ongoing nature of somatic experiences, and consequently troubles the notion of the haptic as clearly delimited within an individuated body. (780)

What is somatically felt, however *intimately*, is not bound to a strict distinction between “inside” and “outside”. Instead, a “haptic” dimension gives rise to what Paterson names a “proximal knowledge” where boundaries between “self” and “other” are more porous than in a visual context. What Paterson calls “the historical emphasis on sight and the optic ... solidifies perceptual “self” / “other” boundaries between “my” body and others based on visual feedback and clearly identifiable visual representations” (781). A “proximal knowledge” on the other hand supposes that when the visual is not the sole source of sensorial knowledge, boundaries between what defines “self” and “other”, “inside” and “outside” are not as strict and straightforward as in a visual context.

Paterson’s questioning of visually-informed perspectives on tactility is echoed by Sally Ann Ness’ suggestion that “forms of danced gesturing” have an

ability to “leave their mark” in a ... permanent manner” (3). Ness’ argues that while “commonsense understanding of danced gesturing is that it expresses itself outward” (5), “if we are to look for the *inward* moving tendencies of danced gesturing, we might do best to look at the mark they leave not upon the space surrounding ... but *upon the bodies that are their medium*” (6). Ness suggests that “what is “inside” the body ... is nothing like “empty space””, but rather “[i]t is a living, historically informed, continuous *movement* of gestural practice. Its tissues are structures that mold and are molded by thinking in action” (24). I extend Ness’ definition to gestures that are not necessarily “danced”, as her argument challenges notions of tactility and of a perceived ephemerality of movement, and it furthers an understanding of intimacy as grounded in one’s perception and in physicality.

“Physical theatres” provide a practical alternative to *spectatorship* by placing audience members and performers alike in a context where performance is actively experienced on a tactile and somatic level, and not predominantly on a visual level. In this respect, “physical theatres” allow an understanding of performance as an intimate encounter, and provide tools for an embodied knowledge of forms of collective intimacy. As exemplified with Debilly’s ability to *touch* the audience despite being still, through her ‘voice-as-gesture’, these “physical theatres” require more than passive spectatorship from audiences. Exploring how movement *feels*, for the performer and for the spectator, along with analysing how movement displaces notions of intimacy, all stem from an interest in the intimate and its correlated implications on identity. In this respect, the “physical theatres” examined in this thesis allow, in David Williams’ words, “space, time and self to be conceived of as ... a field of flows and identities”,

that in turn suggests that “a dynamically spatialised (and fictionalised) self-in-process and in-relation can fray just a little the dualist territorial imaginaries of inside and outside, of self-identity in opposition to radical alterity” (“Writing” 105). Intimacy is taken in this thesis as physical, emotional, phenomenological proximity; as what is kept hidden from an “outside”; and in spatial and relational terms, as what emerges in the space *between*, the space where audiences and performers are *together*.

From physical theatre to “physical theatres”: a French legacy and a British terminology

I delineate in this thesis a type of performance that I label “physical theatres” and that, challenging notions of intimacy, proposes alternative ways of making and experiencing theatre. In the following pages, I propose an extended definition of what constitutes “physical theatres”, and I highlight the importance of a comparative study between two cultural and linguistic contexts. I have mentioned that while the British theatrical landscape was presently rich with examples of “physical theatres”, they were, if not absent from the French context, at least not spoken of in those terms. The specific relationship that France entertains with physicality, movement and the stage is especially striking given the country’s history of fostering artists and pioneers of the likes of Jacques Lecoq, who were to become an inspiration for so many “physical theatres” practitioners across the Channel, or the predominance of circus in the French performing arts. A comparative examination of the way “physical theatres” are deployed and performed in one and the other environment

underlines the differences between two geographically close yet essentially distinct cultural contexts, and highlights the conditions that make these “physical theatres” potentially subversive, in one and the other context. My decision to focus on “physical theatres” is necessarily manifold and partly owes to personal preference. However, there are several other reasons that highlighted the need for such a comparative study. Not inconsequently, my background as a theatre-goer, theatre-maker and student of literature in France all converged to develop my interest in forms of performance, and ways to analyse them, that did not primarily owe to a literary approach, a tendency still characteristic of the French context as I will analyse. This in part informed my decision to pursue this study in the UK. There is still often in France an association of “physical theatres” and generally non-literary performance with an experimental and possibly detrimental avant-garde, as exemplified in the so-called “crisis” triggered by the 2005 edition of the Avignon Festival, where the works of Romeo Castellucci, Jan Fabre or Pascal Rambert were perceived as signing the death of theatre by a significant portion of French critics.⁵ This, along with the relative invisibility in France of such “physical theatres” and coupled with their omnipresence in the UK, where they originated from a similar experimental background, all grounded the need for a comparison between the two. Because of their marginal, invisible or controversial position in the French context, and because of their preponderance in the UK, “physical theatres” seemed a stimulating zone of tension for an analysis. Finally, the centrality of movement and physicality in the “genre” makes it a particularly relevant field for an exploration of movement in theatre, and of its alternative and/or subversive potential.

⁵ See for instance *La Cas Avignon 2005: Regards Critiques*, ed. Georges Banu and Bruno Tackels and Edward Baron Turk's *French Theatre Today*.

One explanation for this different attitude towards “physical theatres” is, I argue, terminological. “physical theatres” remain unmapped in the French context because there is no appropriate vocabulary to speak about them. I am not suggesting that they do not exist, rather that they are not thought of in these terms and that they thus tend to be overlooked. Given the existence of “physical theatres” in France and given, as I am going to show, the influence of French and French-based practitioners and theoreticians on international and especially British “physical theatres”, it seems imperative to start mapping out these contemporary “physical theatres” in the French context. However, identifying these “physical theatres” is not unproblematic: it supposes applying a terminology coined in English to speak about a concept for which there are no words in French. This enterprise is complicated by the fact that the English term is itself a source of debate and discontent. Defining what “physical theatres” refer to in this thesis is thus a prerequisite, and exploring the debates relating to this terminology maps out how the questions I explore here are already contained within these debates. It is for this reason that rather than suggesting a new terminology, I use the same term with a renewed understanding of the critical implications attached to it. I argue that the term continues to be relevant even when the practice(s) it defines have diverged from its original meaning. Re-defining the term does not mean opposing it, and in this respect I extend the existing definition to encompass broader notions of movement and physicality.

A brief and non-exhaustive overview of physical theatre

Albeit frequently encountered in theatre programmes, festivals and companies briefs, the expression ‘physical theatre’ covers a vast array of practices, aesthetics and approaches to performance. This very characteristic makes it a tricky term, and arguably a trickier ‘genre’, to demarcate. It is used to describe the work of companies such as Frantic Assembly, DV8 or Jasmin Vardimon, artists whose approach is, although essentially distinct from one another, nonetheless defined by its athletic virtuosity and associations with dance or dance-theatre.⁶ On the other hand, the term is also used to speak about the work of companies such as Improbable, Complicite, Gecko, Punchdrunk or Kneehigh, whose approach focuses instead on movement used towards storytelling. Whilst these two approaches echo one another, they have their roots in distinct avant-gardes.

The first trend, which draws on or is associated with dance, is inscribed in a tradition stemming from endeavours such as Pina Bausch’s, who was herself drawing on a trend of German dance that sought to, in Royd Climenhaga’s words, “engag[e] content through dance forms” (Climenhaga 14). Climenhaga, in a book dedicated to Bausch, states that “the student revolts of the late 1960s had politicized many artists” in Germany, and “dancers felt the need to break with more conventional dance structures to try to be more culturally relevant” (14). It is with a similar concern that, years later, Britain-based company DV8 Physical Theatre would be formed. DV8 indeed emerged from a desire to break away from the formalism of a certain trend of dance, and to literally make

⁶ That Vardimon’s work should be performed at Sadler’s Wells, a London venue dedicated to dance, illustrates this characteristic, and the company’s presentation on their website locates them within “the British dance theatre scene” (“Jasmin Vardimon”).

dancers' voices heard. Fiona Buckland, in an article dedicated to the company's choreographic language, states that DV8 was "born out of a creative and personal need to express the concerns of the individual, not just as dancer trying to present a piece of movement, but as an emotional being" (372). Franc Chamberlain examines elsewhere how this influenced the company's decision to adopt "the label "physical theatre"" as to "indicate a break from the traditions of contemporary dance" (*Jacques Lecoq* 5). Using the term "theatre" illustrates this "break" from tradition and refers to the use of theatrical devices in the work of the company, both in the devising – the use of improvisation, for instance - and in performance, with a focus on dramaturgy. Climenhaga suggests for example that what defines these forms of physical theatre is "seen ... in the developmental process and use of dance-construction principles to interweave theatrical images" (37). It is clear how this trend of "physical theatre" that has its roots in dance reflects a conception of performance that places emphasis on physicality and movement, and that moves away from text-based dramaturgy, without however rejecting either dramaturgy or text.

The second trend denominated by the expression "physical theatre" predates this dance and dance-theatre oriented tendency. In a monograph dedicated to Jacques Lecoq, Simon Murray notes how there had been "a significant increase in the amount of devised performance which emphasise[s] movement, gesture and mime as the main expressive tools of theatre", "from the 1970s", and in his words, "especially in Britain" (3). This "non-verbal" or "visual" theatre was initiated by what Murray designates as "a loose movement of practitioners, teachers and theorists" (3), influenced by Lecoq and his legacy. A discussion on physical theatre does not go without a mention of Lecoq's name.

The Paris-based École Internationale Jacques Lecoq continues for instance to influence many fringe and experimental theatre makers internationally, and especially in the UK.⁷ The school's training also strongly influenced the work of companies, such as Complicite, that were themselves to become canonical,⁸ highlighting Franc Chamberlain and Ralph Yarrow's comment that this influence on British practitioners was at times acquired second- (if not third-) hand (2). Surprisingly however, Lecoq remains to this day perceived as an outsider in France. This is not to say that his influence is null, as the great number of French-based companies listed as alumni of the school counterexemplifies, but rather that Lecoq's legacy is not so visible and/or recognised in the French context. This question will be explored in greater details later on in this Introduction; however, such a discrepancy highlights the need for a comparison between a theatre context that allowed Lecoq to develop his teaching, yet never fully acknowledged his legacy, and a context where Lecoq's teachings have and continue to thrive, influencing generation after generation of practitioners.

Unsatisfying definitions

While this thesis is not concerned with a Lecoq-only legacy, neither does it focus on dance-theatre only. Instead, I propose a definition of "physical theatres" that encompasses both tendencies and predominantly focuses on theatrical aspects. The fact that so many diverse styles and genres of performance can be advertised and identified under one single heading has been the subject of debates and controversies, and this for possibly as long as the term has been in

⁷ In its alumni section, the School's website lists 26 UK companies and 25 in the USA, against 11 in Spain, 4 in Italy, 2 in Germany and 1 in Ireland ("Élèves de l'école").

⁸ There is indeed a whole generation of practitioners on who Complicite's influence is strongly marked: amongst younger companies, the work of Idle Motion comes to mind.

use. Practitioners invariably deplore how restricted the definition seems in categorising their work. In a book devoted to their creative processes, Frantic Assembly's artistic directors Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett state: “physical theatre” is actually quite a frustrating phrase as it barely manages to describe what we do never mind the wide range of styles and influences that are clustered under its banner” (29). They subsequently summarise saying:

It appears “physical theatre” is used as an umbrella term for aspects of performance including dance theatre, mime, clowning and traditional pictorial or visual theatre ... Within this is an enormous range of “physicality” from the limb-threateningly expressive to the delicate and demonstrative. It can be said that our brand of theatre sits somewhere within this realm and could be rightly termed physical theatre. (30)

Improbable's co-artistic director Phelim McDermott, in John Keefe and Simon Murray's publication dedicated to identifying and framing what “physical theatre” is – and what it is not, echoes Graham and Hoggett's views:

To be honest I never really liked the term “physical theatre” ... If the term “physical theatre” comes up in conversation I often find myself asking these questions: what do we really mean by “physical theatre”? Why did or do we need to talk about it as such? Is this still a useful term and might there be some better ones? (202)

And like Graham and Hoggett, McDermott concludes adding that “[t]he term physical theatre is useful if it is seen as a signpost but not the destination” (207). Tellingly, these practitioners all reject the terminology whilst agreeing that, in the absence of a better definition, it is useful to describe their work. And tellingly, Frantic Assembly’s and Improbable’s work, despite being joined under a singular heading, actually differs significantly in practice. Frantic Assembly’s shows are characterised, in Govan, Nicholson and Normington’s words, by a “highly physicalised performance” that is not without “personal risk” for the performers (61).⁹ On the other hand, Improbable’s work is characterised by experimentations in storytelling and with puppetry.¹⁰ Virtuoso and athletic performances are not excluded from the pieces they make – one might think for example of Matilda Leyser’s aerial work in *Panic* (2009) – yet, unlike in Frantic Assembly’s productions, athletic virtuosity does not take centre stage.

As vague as the term “physical theatre” is, as porous its generic boundaries also are. Graham and Hoggett’s phrase offers the least disappointing definition: “physical theatre” is “an umbrella term for aspects of performance including dance theatre, mime, clowning and traditional pictorial or visual theatre” (30). John Keefe and Simon Murray’s *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction*, and its sister project *A Critical Reader* are perhaps the most exemplary publications on the matter, not least because of the admitted uncertain boundaries of their perspectives.¹¹ The decision by the editors to use the plural (“physical theatres”) in the title signals the fraught nature of any attempt at a

⁹ This is illustrated in pieces such as *Beautiful Burnout* (2010) for example, that explores the ambitions and hardships of young working-class boxers.

¹⁰ Exemplified in work as diverse as the company’s staging of Philip Glass’ opera *Satyagraha* (2007-2011); *Panic* (2009), where Phelim McDermott sports a puppet penis of gigantic proportions, or the company’s take on Punch and Judy in *The Devil and Mister Punch* (2012).

¹¹ It must be noted that Keefe and Murray leave aside the legacy of dance to focus instead on the trend that draws on storytelling and “non-verbal” theatre.

definition. In *A Critical Introduction*, Keefe and Murray underline why the term should not however be altogether discarded:

physical theatre as a term, idea or concept captures the aims of certain movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to confront the continuing hegemony of a theatre defined by its literary and verbal dimensions. (*Introduction* 6)

They add that “physical theatre” then traces its origins ... to those ideologies and manifestos which sought to reverse a dualism and hierarchy of word over body” (7), and to contest, in practice, the Cartesian divide between body and mind that marked practices and discourses about theatre (among other disciplines) in the West. They however acknowledge the reductive dimension of the term, and “also propose that such theatre must be contextualised within the historical and ongoing practices we call the “physical in theatres” which are found in all theatres as centred on the (moving-speaking) body” (6). Similarly, my rationale for reclaiming the relevance of the term lies in the way it reflects its anchorage in a genealogy of both “physical theatre” and “the physical in theatre”.

I will not be adding another unsatisfying expression to the plethora of existing definitions. Instead, I adopt a terminology coined elsewhere and adapt it to my argument, acknowledging the discussions and debates that nurtured the field. Simon Murray stated in 2003 that “the term is more a marketing tool than a useful framework for analysing new developments in theatre practice” (*Jacques Lecoq* 34). The question is arguably more acute today. However, I am reluctant to abandon the term altogether as along with providing a commonly understood

terminology, it refers to debates and a genealogy of practices that places corporeality and movement at the centre. In his contribution to Keefe and Murray's *Critical Reader*, Franc Chamberlain suggests a helpful terminological reconsideration. Chamberlain argues that the expression "physical theatre" has "reached its point of exhaustion" and that it "no longer describes a movement of renewal in British theatre and performance, nor an innovative way of teaching or making performance, nor even a particularly useful critical term" (120). Chamberlain calls for a new terminology that "catches the diversity of what's happening in the performance world in the wake of the physical theatre adventure" (120). He suggests using "post-physical performance", as what "comes after physical theatre", with the term "performance" used to take into account "the diversity of work that has emerged from those movements" (121). This argument in favour of a post-physical performance field of inquiry has been highly influential for this thesis. Including the "post-" in physical theatre allows one, after Chamberlain, to include "unexpected hybrids" and multimedia or virtual theatres (121). In Chamberlain's words, "whilst physical theatre sets up a number of generic expectations, the post-physical implies their suspension" (121) and simultaneously acknowledges its "ancestry": the field they overflow.

If the "post-" is accepted in this thesis as enabling a discussion that goes beyond the expectations and pitfalls attached to "physical theatre", I suggest restricting Chamberlain's terminology. Using "performance" instead of "theatre" allows, in Chamberlain's perspective, the inclusion of a wider spectrum of practices. Within the framework of this thesis however, it is necessary to focus back on "theatre", albeit acknowledging "post-physical theatre" as a sub-category of the wider "post-physical performance" paradigm. The four case

studies that I examine are indeed *theatre*, and each one of these four practitioners would recognise their work as such. All four are distinct from instances of “dance-theatre” that the term “physical theatre” could also encompass. This does not exclude, however, work that uses dance as *one* of its means of expression. Chamberlain’s call for the inclusion of a wider range of productions under a single heading, and the fact that the work I examine is not solely performance but specifically theatre, influenced my decision to attach Keefe and Murray’s use of the plural (“theatres”) to Chamberlain’s discussion on the “post-”. Thus, the field of inquiry with which this thesis is concerned is the one of “post-physical theatres”: a field that simultaneously encompasses visual and choreographed dimensions along with what Keefe and Murray have termed “the physical *in* theatre” (*Critical Introduction* 4). I will however, for the sake of clarity, refer to these “post-physical theatres” under the shorthand “physical theatres”. The debates surrounding the terminology, which is criticised for being imprecise and occasionally inaccurate, seem a sufficient reason to not refer to these practices with a term that could possibly be more obscure. This decision to refer to “physical theatres” does not however undermine the terminological discussion that preceded, and highlights how the terminology used throughout this thesis owes to the multiple debates that inform the field. As suggested by these terminological and historical considerations, speaking of “physical theatres” joins under the same umbrella different practices that all have in common a focus on corporeality and physicality. I will examine in this thesis how such an emphasis is effective from both a practitioner’s and an audience member’s perspective, suggesting in this respect that the term “physical theatres” is now

more relevant than ever, and delineates an area of performance that provides a renewed understanding of theatre-practice and spectatorship.

“Physical theatres” and devising

I have shown how “physical theatres” designate work where movement is at the centre of the creative process, and is not accessory to (spoken or written) text. This horizontal relationship between text and movement is often matched by a reconsideration of authorship, where work is created and authored collectively. “Physical theatres” are in this respect associated with and sometimes synonymous of “devised theatre”. Many of the artists working in the field I have demarcated as “physical theatres” acknowledge their creative processes draw on a tradition of devised performance. Keefe and Murray dedicate a whole sub-section to the question in their *Critical Introduction* and propose to “acknowledge the critical interrelationship between the emergence – and naming – of a plethora of physical performance practices, and the growth in *devised*, collaboratively authored works of theatre” (17). Keefe and Murray analyse how both “physical” and “devised” theatres diverge from “text-based theatres”, stating that the “key line of distinction” between the two “lies around notions of authorship, authority and the creative role of the actor/performer” (17). Keefe and Murray conclude saying that, because there exists “a productive and symbiotic relationship that is impossible to ignore” between physical and devised theatres, “[a] critical dimension of understanding the emergence of physical theatre practices is to locate them historically within the devising paradigm and its politics of *process*” (18). This association of “physical theatres” with devised practices is mirrored by some of the main publications on devised

performance that also acknowledge this interrelationship, naming the success of companies such as Frantic Assembly or DV8 as evidence of the popularity of devised performance (Govan et al. 4).

“Physical theatres” are thus considered here as an offshoot of the broader field of devised theatre. Key elements that define devised performance and that are found in “physical theatres” are a focus on process (Keefe and Murray 18; Govan et al. 7, Heddon and Milling 2-4) and the importance of notions such as subjectivity, authenticity and the idea of a “creative performer” (Govan et al. 30; Keefe and Murray 17). Collaboration and shared authorship also constitute landmark notions of both devised and physical theatres, with “compan[ies]” acknowledged as authors of the work (Heddon and Milling 3).¹² Finally, devised performance designates work in which, in Heddon and Milling’s words, “no script – neither written play-text nor performance score – exists prior to the work’s creation by the company” (3). What these emphases on collaborative approaches, processes and a distancing from pre-existing scores have in common is a separation from text-based, literary approaches. The idea of a “creative performer” is matched by a claim for authenticity that often contaminates the way companies identify their processes and the nature of their work. This goes hand in hand with the centrality of the performer’s body as a site of subjectivity, which Govan et al. identify as stemming from the interest of 20th century dance for psychoanalysis.¹³ Heddon and Milling connect this to a “distrust of words”

¹² Heddon and Milling are also prompt to note that collaboration is not an essential element of devised performance, rightly pointing out that “devised performance can be done by one performer only”, albeit always dependent on a number of indirect collaborators, such as audiences, technicians, etc. (3).

¹³ They mention for example the influence of Martha Graham’s approach, seen as a means to express one’s subjectivity through a mastery of movement that would allow one to be attuned to the body’s inner life. For a more detailed exploration of Graham’s conception of dance, see Graham’s *Blood Memory* and Helpert’s *The Technique of Martha Graham*.

and “the embodiment of the death of the author” (3), both dimensions illustrated by an emphasis on physicality and corporeality both in performance and during the creative process.¹⁴ However, such discourses about the centrality of the body run the risk of re-establishing the very Cartesian divide they attempted to criticise by advocating a bodily language as opposed to a “rational”, literary means of expression, thus reiterating the idea of a divide between body and mind.¹⁵ This discussion highlights formal parallels between devised and “physical theatres”. Whilst I do not deny that devising is also used in forms of performance that would not be seen as stemming from a “physical theatre” tradition, the term “physical theatres” will from now on in this thesis refer to work created through a devising process.

As this Introduction has started to map out, the “physical theatres” I refer to in this thesis are not pieces of dance-theatre; they instead utilise physical vocabularies, including dance, as means to make *theatre*. This is echoed by a certain trend of contemporary British performance that is marked by a renewed concern with narrative, what Carl Lavery calls “the role of stories and storytelling in the work of [some] UK companies and artists” (“Is There A Text” 37). The visual storytelling of Paper Cinema (*The Odyssey* 2012), the work of spoken word artist Kate Tempest (*Brand New Ancients* 2013), or recent productions of

¹⁴ Such suspicion towards words finds echoes in trends of contemporary playwriting that, from Beckett onwards, have cast a doubt on language as that which cannot be trusted. French scholar Elisabeth Angel-Perez links this discredit of language to the trauma of Auschwitz, in an echo to Edward Bond’s statement that we are all citizens of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and Theodor Adorno’s maxim that “[é]crire un poème après Auschwitz est barbare” (“In the wake of Auschwitz, it is now barbarous to write poetry”) (qtd in Angel-Perez 21). Surprisingly, parallels between this trend in playwriting on the one hand, and an emphasis on movement and physicality as instruments for an alternative expressive language on the other, have, to my knowledge, rarely been examined.

¹⁵ Whilst such discourse is very largely losing terrain in publications on physical and devised performances, it remains nonetheless surprisingly present in many practitioners’ vocabularies. Echoes of this Cartesian dichotomy are for example found in Leslie O’Dell’s *The Charismatic Chameleon*, where the author opposes the work of the practitioner to the “hair splitting” (258) of academics.

Complicite (*A Disappearing Number* 2008; *Master and Margarita* 2012) constitute excellent examples of this trend. I argue that has emerged in the past few years, and especially on British stages, a form of “physical theatres” that goes beyond what Hans-Thies Lehmann analysed at the turn of the century as “postdramatic theatre”. In Lehmann’s definition, “postdramatic theatre” emerges when “the progression of a story with its internal logic no longer forms the centre, when composition is no longer experienced as an organising quality but as an artificial imposed “manufacture” ... then theatre is confronted with the question of possibilities beyond drama” (26). Lehmann adds that it is “a theatre of states and of scenically dynamic formations” (68). I argue on the other hand that the trend of “physical theatres” that focuses on stories and on the dramaturgical conditions for the communication of these stories, move beyond a “postdramatic” perspective. They do not return to the “dramatic” theatres that preceded “postdramatic” endeavours; rather, they have adopted “postdramatic” aesthetics and methodologies to construct a renewed dramatic theatre. The “dream images” (84) and synaesthesia (84) that Lehmann identifies as landmarks of “postdramatic” theatres, the “simultaneity of signs” (87) and their “density” (89), or the rejection of “the primacy of the text” (21), are all encountered in the “physical theatres” I examine, albeit with the aim of recomposing narratives and “dramas”. Similarly, when Lehmann classifies “physicality” as a key component of “postdramatic” theatres, he suggests that “[t]he body becomes the centre of attention, not as a carrier of meaning but in its physicality and gesticulation”. He adds that “[t]he central theatrical sign, the actor’s body, refuses to serve signification” (95). In the “physical theatres” I examine, on the other hand, physicality, far from “refus[ing] to serve signification”, is used to create

narratives. Physicality is not used as a text, a language that tells stories; rather, it is in their phenomenal presence that physicality and movement generate a layer of experience that contributes to coining narratives.

An Anglophone framework

The definition and terminology that have been established so far in this introduction are constructed around concepts developed in an Anglophone context, widely used in the UK and to an extent in the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, albeit with regional variations.¹⁶ While applying a terminology – and the attached concepts – that draws on a genealogy of “physical theatres” to work created and performed in the UK raises the issue of the limitations of such terminology and its rejection by many practitioners, its application to work taken from the French context is complicated by the fact that there exists no equivalent term in the French language with which to translate “physical theatre” - or even “devised theatre”. Applying a terminology coined within one context to work produced in another one where equivalent terminology is not available raises first of all the question of a culturally specific terminology, and its applicability to another cultural context, however closely related the two may apparently be.

The example works the other way round: the English language does not have an equivalent for the terms “dramaturg” or “mise en scène”.¹⁷ The latter, defined by Murray as “refer(ring) to all elements of the staging of a piece of theatre ... and their relationship to each other and to spectators” (*Jacques Lecoq*, 7), has in English a more restricted meaning than in French, where it also

¹⁶ Heddon and Milling note for instance that “British and Australian companies tend to use “devising” to describe their practice, whereas in the USA it is referred to most often as “collaborative creation”” (2).

¹⁷ I am indebted here to Professor Katie Normington for her suggestion.

encompasses direction and scenography. “Dramaturg” crystallises the idea of a linguistic absence in one context - this time, the UK one – that is accompanied by a conceptual invisibility. This is not to say that the function of “dramaturg” does not exist, but rather that it tended to be under-examined until recently, when debates surrounding the question emerged. Terminological considerations bring to light a function that existed but was not theorised as such: Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, commenting in their “Editorial” of a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on the fact that all the articles featured in the issue draw on a British context, suggest that

it may be that where there is no tradition of deploying the term “dramaturgy”, and where it appears as an emerging and increasingly significant field, this creates a drive for people to begin to ask fundamental questions about what dramaturgy is, and to define it in relation to existing practices (146).

Similarly, applying a terminology coined in the British context to work produced on both sides of the Channel allows French work to be analysed in a different light, using tools that differ from the dominant critical frameworks used in theatre studies in France. Such a double-culturally informed study ricochets to cast new light on work produced in the UK. For if in English the terminology is far from being stable and/or clear enough, the plurality and subtlety of terminological options have at least the merit of carrying a set of expectations and assumptions as to a specific *genre* of performance, however imprecise this genre’s boundaries. In French on the other hand, the absence of a term for either

“physical theatre”, “devised theatre” and the multitude of more or less precise and intricate alternatives provided by the English language, means that whilst such a “genre” exists, it remains largely unmapped. I will draw a wider picture of the French theatre landscape; however, since this section opened with a terminological discussion that emerged from the British context, I shall start by examining it first.

“Physical theatres” in the United Kingdom

The performance practices I have delineated as “physical theatres” have historically been regarded as alternatives to the mainstream; acts of rebellion against text-based theatre with their focus on physicality; models for different ways of collaborating and authoring performance, and by extension, as a social and political model of horizontal relationships rather than vertical hierarchies. Baz Kershaw for example lists in 1999 “physical theatre” as one of the alternative underground genres that “established themselves ... beyond the cultural mainstream” (59). Although the location of devised and physical theatres on the margins has since been displaced, as I will examine shortly, the association of “physical theatres” with the alternative holds strong. Devising for instance is still often presented as offering alternative models of creation, “stretching the limits of established practices” and “exceeding traditional theatre boundaries” (Govan et al. 3). Many of the “soundbites” Heddon and Milling provide to define devised performance are coloured by political undertones:

Devising is variously: a social expression of non-hierarchical possibilities; a model of cooperative and non-hierarchical collaboration; ... a practical expression of political and ideological commitment; a means of taking control of the work and operating autonomously; a de-commodification of art; ... a means to incite social change... (4)

Whilst the debt “physical theatres” owe to this historical avant-garde status needs to be taken into account and, since the alternative political models offered by devised performance continue to constitute a major appeal of the style, the situation has significantly changed. Heddon and Milling, referring to a chapter in Gill Lamsden’s book on devising entitled “Devising As a Profession”, mention that such terminology “seems to mark a shift from categorising “devising” as an innovative, fringe practice, to seeing it within the commercial, mainstream sector” (6). Similarly, Govan, Nicholson and Normington acknowledge devised theatre’s entry “in the mainstream”, stating that if the genre’s political roots were active in the 1970s, they were declining in the 1990s. Govan et al. identify as one of the causes for this the fact that such a “form of collaboration ... supports the commercial viability of companies” (4), with the hiring of “freelance practitioners” instead of permanent members being more economically sound: a reason for the continuing success of such forms of organisation.

If “physical theatres” used to represent and occasionally embody political ideals, their inclusion nowadays in a part of the industry that can be perceived as “mainstream” problematises their status as alternative and potentially subversive

practices. Heddon and Milling's claim that "devised performances have become the dominant products of theatrical culture" (6) could be tempered by saying that text-based and naturalistic trends of theatre remain especially present in the British industry.¹⁸ However, it underlines that "physical theatres" do not equate with underground practices anymore. Established devised theatre makers have become widely visible: one thinks for instance about Complicite's *A Disappearing Number* (2008) transferring from the Barbican to the West End, with a run at the Novello Theatre in September 2010, or the success and visibility of Punchdrunk's collaboration with the National Theatre, *The Drowning Man* (2013-2014). The proliferation in recent years of devised and, increasingly, physical theatre courses in higher education furthers this shift away from an "underground" context and gives visibility to these practices. Given these considerations and "physical theatres"'s historical relationship with the avant-garde, choosing "physical theatres" as a field of inquiry asks how can "physical theatres" suggest an alternative and be potentially subversive in the UK today.

Overspills

The relatively wide visibility granted to "physical theatres" in the UK highlights first how they have moved from being perceived as transgressive to having penetrated a more commercial part of the theatre industry. This illustrates how any strict stylistic distinction between a perceived "mainstream" and a

¹⁸ A thorough exploration of this question goes beyond the scope of this thesis. As a rapid illustration of this point however, the course programme for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts BA degree in Acting provides a particularly telling example. The RADA website states that the "training is firmly rooted in the traditions of classical theatre as this provides the most solid foundation for the demands of a career in the acting profession". And indeed, whilst "movement training, including dance, masks and stage combat" is part of the curriculum, the main teachings are in "Stanislavsky-based rehearsal exercises", "contemporary and classical text" or "acting for camera", with no mention of approaches that draw on devising.

fringe or alternative side of the industry is skewed, with a few exceptions. As we will see, the frontier between the two is anything but straightforward. In his contribution to the third volume he edited of *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, Baz Kershaw maps out the genealogy of this overspill of alternative theatres into the dominant theatre culture. In an article entitled “Alternative Theatres, 1946-2000”, Kershaw traces the evolution of fringe theatre in Britain stating first that “the contrast between “alternative” and “mainstream”, in practice, has never been straightforward” (345). Kershaw draws a parallel between this blurry delineation and the terminological uncertainty that defines attempts to circumscribe “alternative” theatres, also on occasion called “underground”, “fringe”, or “experimental” (350). Such uncertainty is a sign, for Kershaw, of “the messiness of its development” (350). Indeed, fringe theatres were often defined by their political roots in the 1960s and 1970s, and continued to flourish in the 1980s in spite of economic harshness.¹⁹ A part of this production however, according to Kershaw, moved from popular theatre, that dealt with clear political agendas, towards a more “populist” trend. The latter consisted of using “low” forms of performance, such as cabaret or circus, in an attempt to draw audiences and to make class-sensitive or class-specific theatre, thus locating politics in form even when political topics were not directly evoked (362-3).²⁰ Kershaw’s article ends on the 1990s and the turn of the century, on a claim that British theatre then benefited from an aesthetic “anarchic environment” that saw “the creative iconoclasm of alternative/fringe performance spilled over into mainstream practices” (370). Kershaw argues that

¹⁹ Kershaw notes for instance how “one paradoxical effect of the new Conservative dispensation was a steady growth of alternative theatres” until the middle of the decade (365).

²⁰ Kershaw names as examples the work of companies such as The Footsbarn Travelling Theatre or Welfare State International.

the “brave new world of post-modern culture” is what “undermined the distinctions that had sustained a sense of alternative theatre as a movement or fringe theatre as a sector during the previous three decades” (371).

This merging of fringe and mainstream practices is perhaps more palpable today: the popularity and visibility of organisations such as Battersea Arts Centre, the Lyric Hammersmith or Shunt (unarguably enhanced for the latter by its nightlife in the Lounge situated in the London Bridge vaults until the company’s relocation to Bermondsey Street, in 2010); Barbican and its programming of work by alternative, experimental yet renowned companies such as Complicite (*Master and Margarita*, 2012), Societas Raffaello Sanzio (*Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, 2009; *On The Concept of The Face, Regarding the Son of God*, 2011), Duckie (*Lullaby*, 2011), You Me Bum Bum Train (2010, 2012), to name but a few, are exemplary of this tendency. The fact that the aforementioned companies’ tickets often sell out, occasionally within minutes of them being released, highlights that the trend identified by Govan et al. in 2007 that “the counter-cultural fringe [was] becoming increasingly successful and entering the mainstream” (4) remains very much the same five years onwards, at least in London.

This shift is perceived in positive terms, as exemplified in a publication by the Live Art Development Agency, *Programme Notes: Case Studies for Locating Experimental Performance*. *Programme Notes* aims to further “dialogues and collaborations between the theatrical mainstream and the independent sector” (Brine et al. 6). In her contribution, critic Lyn Gardner claims that “[p]erhaps not since the 1960s has Britain’s theatre culture been quite so fluid, ... more willing to break the rules set by a theatre establishment that still

clings to the late 19th and early 20th century notions of theatre practice” (“There Is Something” 12). Gardner sees what she terms “the dominance” of a Stanislavsky-inspired theatre practice as coming to an end, and analyses that this “movement has the potential to put theatre and live art right at the centre of our culture as it breaks down all the old divisions and suspicions between theatre and live art, the playhouse and the gallery, the text and the visual and physical” (“There Is Something” 13). The interest Gardner sees in these boundaries being broken down is twofold: on the one hand, she argues that it has the potential to be accessed by more spectators than work that takes place “behind the closed doors of the playhouse” (13); on the other, Gardner suggests that it might be a sign of the exhaustion of “the uniformisation of “culture” on a global scale”, and that increasingly “audiences ... hunger for cultural experiences which not only are different but which have an authenticity” (14). This last comment is particularly telling, first for the way it establishes a connection between this penetration of practices historically perceived as alternative into “the theatrical mainstream” (Brine et al. 6) to a desire from audiences to veer away from a dominant, commercially oriented theatre culture. Secondly, Gardner’s choice to use the term “authenticity” is especially revealing for, as I analyse in the two case studies that focus on British companies, it characterises an important part of the contemporary “physical theatres” production in the UK.

As both Gardner and Kershaw underline, there is less of a distinction between a mainstream and a fringe context than an inter-penetration of experimental, commercial, traditional and fringe theatres. Rather than stylistic or aesthetic, the distinction between “visible” and “fringe” companies tends to be economic. There are many examples of fringe companies that do not challenge

nor experiment with the medium, when visible companies such as Forced Entertainment or Complicite continue, in most cases, to be alternative if not always avant-garde. In such a context, and given how “physical theatres” have within it risen to visibility and occasionally achieved commercial success, we must consider how they subtly renew themselves and provide alternative tools for making and experiencing performance.

On the other side of the Channel: locating “physical theatres” in the French context.

“Physical theatres”: a genre with no name.

If the English offers too many definitions for a term that refers to a protean category of work, the problem appears in reverse in the French context: to the terminological over-abundance in one context corresponds a striking absence in the other. At first, several approximate translations do not seem too distant from the English term: expressions such as “théâtre gestuel”, “théâtre corporel”, and even a few instances of the deceptively transparent and clumsy “théâtre physique”.²¹ However, translating the two words together does not help: in French, the expression does not benefit from as wide a spectrum of connotations as it does in English, and evokes an insider’s shorthand more than a clear theatrical genre. “Théâtre gestuel” emphasises gesture rather than movement as a whole, and it is often juxtaposed with mime rather than dance or live art, which, if not the basis of my definition of “physical theatres”, constitute an element of it.

²¹ “Gestural theatre”, “corporeal theatre”. All translations from the French in the thesis are mine, unless otherwise specified. The insertion of quotes in French in the body of the text and their translation in footnotes echoes the bilingual perspective that I develop with this project. I have also occasionally decided to keep the French without providing a translation, when it has seemed critically adequate. I develop these questions more precisely in Chapter 2.

The expression “théâtre visuel”, occasionally used to describe practices that resemble the “physical theatres” I have circumscribed is also associated in French with performance practices that use signs to express a message: pantomimes at the beginning of the 20th century (Martinez 18) or theatre delivered in Signed French are two examples.²² Finally, “théâtre corporel” is unsatisfying for the way it echoes “mime corporel”, a term coined by Étienne Decroux to describe a practice that focuses on the mechanics and expressivity of the body, and that is specific to this one practitioner and his legacy. What these terminological options suggest on the other hand is that there are practices, in the French context, that border on or feed into what I have identified as “physical theatres”. Tellingly too, an important amount of experimentations that were to shape “physical theatres” in the UK originated in France, yet are rarely labelled or acknowledged as such in the French context. Mapping out examples of cross-pollinations first, and drawing a (necessarily non-exhaustive) outline of the French theatrical landscape in a second instance, highlight how a comparative study is relevant. While delimiting boundaries is an unavoidably artificial exercise, it underlines areas of French theatre that are often not at the forefront. This endeavour also shows how, despite coming to the fore in the 1980s, “physical theatres” have a long-standing history that spans a large portion of the twentieth century and are grounded in earlier avant-gardes.

²² There exists a structure dedicated to visual theatre in Signed Language that also programs work of a “physical theatre” tradition: the International Visual Theatre, based in Paris (*ivt.fr*).

Experimental practices: Franco-British cross-pollinations in the twentieth century.

The importance and predominance of Jacques Lecoq's legacy in the UK, mentioned earlier on in this Introduction, and especially compared with its relative invisibility in the French context, is symptomatic of a wider situation. While examples of cross-pollination are numerous and have informed "physical theatres" on each side of the Channel, there is still a common perception in the UK of "physical theatres" as owing greatly to a French legacy.

DV8's decision to adopt the term "physical theatre" echoed earlier experimentations, such as Pina Bausch's. Similarly, the trend of "physical theatres" that owes more to theatre than to dance, and that was undeniably informed by Lecoq's legacy, has its roots in earlier avant-gardes. Theorists and practitioners such as Antonin Artaud or Jacques Copeau have had an influence at times so pervasive and "so firmly embedded in the cultural framework of the British, European and American theatre industries that it has become taken for granted" (2), as Mark Evans writes about the latter's legacy. Evans argues for instance that Copeau's

innovative work on the use of masks, improvisation, mime and physical expression, as training tools for the actor and as elements within the creation and presentation of performance, have led to his current recognition as a key figure in the history of what is now referred to as "physical theatre". (2)

Copeau's legacy was propagated across the Channel (and the Atlantic) by his nephew Michel Saint-Denis, who founded the Old Vic Theatre School in London

and eventually became one of the first directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1962, alongside Peter Hall and Peter Brook (Evans 154-155). Evans further states that Copeau's legacy "had a fundamental effect" on the Royal Shakespeare Company, emphasising a "style of acting that was vital, energetic and physically expressive" whilst "respect[ing] the centrality of the text" (155). Copeau's legacy in France can be divided into what Simon Murray calls "two - overlapping - groups" (*Jacques Lecoq* 29). Murray places Saint-Denis in the first one, alongside artists who "worked largely in text-based, popular and often politically committed theatre during the inter- and post-war years", and describes the second as "a select group of individuals dedicated to the reinvention and modernisation of mime", composed of Étienne Decroux, Marcel Marceau, Jean-Louis Barrault and Jacques Lecoq (*Jacques Lecoq* 29). These practitioners were subsequently to have an influence of their own on the development of "physical theatres" in France and in the UK.

The influence of Antonin Artaud on experimental and physical performance, whether acknowledged or subterranean, is similarly near-ubiquitous and often more visible than Copeau's (Evans 2). In an article exploring the relationships between epidemiology and Artaud's theories on theatre, Stanton B. Garner Jr. states that Artaud "inspired later ... theatre artists who sought to make the body the center of a newly corporealized contemporary theatre" (12). Helga Finter concurs stating that the questions at the core of Artaud's perspectives on theatre were to inspire experimental performance and live art from the 1960s onwards (18). The examples that Finter examines as having been influenced by an Artaudian legacy share characteristics with the "physical theatres" this thesis is concerned with: the question of the embodiment

of voice and its potential for tactility; the centrality of physicality; the possibility of *experiencing* performance and what Garner calls “a more metaphysical psychosomatic mode of being” (11). Artaud’s legacy on experimental performance can be seen in the practice of “such groups as The Living Theater and Grotowski’s Polish Laboratory Theatre” (Garner 12), themselves key figures in the development of experimental and physical performance in Europe. In the UK, Artaud’s influence was directly referenced in Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz’s *Theatre of Cruelty Season* at LAMDA, in London, in 1964. The latter proved to be what Clive Garner, in an introduction published in 1996 to a scathing review of Brook and Marowitz’s experiments he had written in 1964, calls “a crucial crossroads in the British theatre”, with “the interest in Artaud and Theatre of Cruelty one of the manifestations of a growing frustration with the British actor’s inability or unwillingness to physicalize the action rather than to intellectualize or verbalize it” (130). The influence of such experiments in Britain opened possibilities for new modes of performance, prompted by a rejection of an acting style that was more verbal than physical.

It is undeniable that a large portion of the seeds of the “physical theatres” that grew in Britain, whether Lecoq-inspired or not, were French, and that these “physical theatres” often continue to be perceived as such. On the other hand, another type of theatrical cross-pollination saw a large number of foreign theatre-makers settle in Paris throughout the twentieth century, profoundly affecting the French theatrical landscape. These include Argentines Jorge Lavelli and Victor Garcia, Spaniard Fernando Arrabal or Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky, who favoured what Maria Delgado and David Bradby have called “a vision of the theatrical event as an arena of arresting images and an experience which

stimulates, provokes and disturbs an audience in a particularly sensory, sensual and mystical way” (Bradby and Delgado 8). Another particularly notable example is American Robert Wilson, still referred to in France as Bob Wilson. Bradby and Delgado suggest that France’s penchant for Wilson was partly enabled by the Living Theatre’s stay in 1968 and “their performances and social agitation” that “helped create the atmosphere in which ... Wilson was so warmly received” (6). Maria Shevstova has indeed shown that, backed up by consequential public funding in Europe and especially from French governments, regardless of “the[ir] position ... on the left or the right of the political spectrum” (22), Wilson was able to make work and thus enabled audiences to grow “comfortable with his idiom” (14). Wilson’s visibility over several decades has had a strong influence on the French theatrical production. In Annie Sparks’ words, this gave theatre-makers “permission to cut loose from dramatic text altogether and to broaden the range of their field of research for materials from which theatre could be made” (50). It also “encouraged”, as Bradby and Delgado put it, “an expansion of the parameters of state language” (6) and subsequently of funding requirements. In Bradby and Delgado’s words, “[e]mphasis was increasingly placed on openness, ambiguity, a theatre of strange images and of disconnected, dream-like experiences, rather than of characters, plots or ideas” (6).

The other obvious example of cross-pollination, and one that is particularly relevant to this thesis’ subject, is the move of British director Peter Brook to Paris in the early 1970s. Bradby and Delgado note how Brook was “strongly influenced in his decision to move out of commercial theatre and into experimental work by the example of Grotowski”, who had received a

“favourable welcome ... in Paris”. This “helped persuade Brook that he too would find a more conducive atmosphere there than in London for the work he really wanted to pursue” (10). Before him, Joan Littlewood had already received consequential support in France in the 1950s, at a time where her work was not “subsidised or recognised in [her] home country” (Bradby and Delgado 10). In the context of 1970s Paris, which had welcomed a wide array of experimental and conceptual performance-makers from all over the world, Brook’s Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale (which later became Centre International de Créations Théâtrales) was able to flourish and become home to a variety of international performers who in turn contributed to shaping the French theatrical landscape.

This overview of the influences and exchanges between France and the UK, but also between France and the rest of the world, underlines first how there is in either country a history of theatrical experiments that lead to the “physical theatres” I explore here. This fact makes all the more urgent an exploration of French “physical theatres” as they remain under-theorised and under-represented in the country that nurtured so many experimentations and where so many practitioners were invited to live, work and receive funding. Whilst this thesis is not concerned with examining a British influence on French “physical theatres” or vice-versa, a comparative approach highlights a paradox in the fact that so much of what enabled British “physical theatres” was initiated in France and/or by French theorists, practitioners or governmental cultural policies, yet that such legacy should currently be under-represented. In the following pages, I provide a rapid overview of these practices, suggesting reasons as to why they remain under-examined.

A few words on mime

There is currently in France a movement of redefinition and reconsideration of mime as an independent genre of performance. Many of the expressions I mentioned as potential transpositions of the term “physical theatre” are inscribed in these debates. Mirroring how the term “physical theatre” is contentious in English, “mime” is in French the object of multiple discussions. The reluctance of many practitioners to use it can be compared to the steering away from “physical theatre” that practitioners in the UK are keen to mark; however, unlike the debates that surround the terminology in the UK, discussions in the French context regarding a renewal of mime are marginal. A few initiatives have been taken in recent years to promote mime as an art form and to influence public policies regarding the performing arts. In December 2008, as a consequence of a “Journée” that took place in Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, a Groupe de Liaison des Arts du Mime et du Geste (abbreviated as GLAM) was created (“Manifeste” 2). The function of GLAM is to gather practitioners, researchers and public bodies, for roundtables and discussions, and to propose concrete measures to improve the situation and visibility of “arts du mime et du geste”. Following the Vieux-Colombier roundtable, GLAM organised a two-day event during the 2010 Avignon Festival, during which a “manifesto” was drawn up and submitted to the Ministère de la Culture. The “manifesto” focuses around three main categories: creation and promotion; formation and transmission; resources and networking (3). This aim of promoting “arts du mime et du geste” as an art form *per se* is accompanied by a reclaiming of the term “mime”, often perceived in France as an obsolete art form. This desire is encountered throughout the manifesto, but also on publications from companies and

associations aiming at the promotion of mime. The “manifesto” states for instance that if “le mime a souvent influencé des esthétiques novatrices” of the likes of Robert Wilson, Simon McBurney or Philippe Genty, “la disgrâce du mime traditionnel, le dialogue avec les avant-gardes ... les emprunts aux techniques de clown, mais également au nô, au kabuki ou au butô ... ont en retour progressivement érodé le mime comme genre spécifique”. It adds that “[b]ien que le mime ait évolué ... et se soit renouvelé, le mot est aujourd’hui comme dans une image d’Épinal solidement ancrée à l’imaginaire collectif” (6).²³ The terminological section of the “manifesto” ends with the statement that to use the word “mime” “relève d’une posture militante, qui appelle un lourd travail de médiation et de pédagogie”. Because “d’aucun la juge prématurée ... un consensus se dessine sur la dénomination plurielle “arts du mime et du geste”” (6).²⁴

What this last sentence crystallises is the fact that “mime” often continues to be perceived as a solidified and quaint art form. It also underlines that the “mime” community, despite its minority position in the French theatre world, might not be as united as one might wish, especially when it comes to defining the boundaries of the genre. This is illustrated for example with the dismissal in 2010 of Étienne Bonduelle from the direction of mime Festival Mimos, the sole of its kind in France. Bonduelle, then artistic director of the festival, read of his eviction in the local newspapers (Pillavoine; “Interview”). This decision was

²³ “Mime has on many occasions influenced innovative aesthetics”; “the disgrace of traditional mime, the dialogue with avant-garde practices ... the borrowings from clowning techniques, but also from noh, kabuki or butoh ... have in return eroded the status of mime as a specific genre”; “although mime has evolved ... and has renewed itself, the word is still often associated, in the collective imaginary, with a quaint idealised image”.

²⁴ “Is a militant act that presupposes an important effort to educate and introduce audiences to the work”; “some find this decision premature ... a consensus has thus been reached in favour of the plural denomination “arts du mime et du geste”.”

motivated, in festival organiser Paul Larue’s words, by a desire for “un recentrage sur l’organisation générale de Mimos. Celui-ci a trop flirté avec les marges artistiques du mime, ces dernières années” (qtd in Baillet).²⁵ Bonduelle is also in the initiative – and is now president - of an organisation dedicated to mime, since 1998: formerly known as the Centre pour les Arts du Mime et du Geste, it was renamed Centre du Nouveau Mime in 2009 and Centre National du Mime in 2014²⁶ (“Centre du Nouveau Mime”).²⁷ This rebranding illustrates the conceptual shift called for in the “manifesto” and that the CNM seems to have adopted. However, when Bonduelle and members of the CNM attended the 2010 GLAM roundtable in Avignon, they did not feature in the list of participants of the 2012 Mimos edition (“Centre National du Théâtre”). Whether CNM absence from the 2012 GLAM roundtable originated from internal dissensions or was simply caused by unavailability is unclear; it is however surprising given Bonduelle’s former predominant position in discussions of this type. It is also perhaps not insignificant that while GLAM continues to advertise “arts du mime et du geste”, CNM focuses on a narrower definition, exemplified by their use of the expression “nouveau mime”, and put in practice in their bi-annual publications. At the time of writing, all four issues of the CNM publication were clearly directed towards a “resistant” reclaiming of the term, albeit in especially conservative and exclusive terms – probably not the best way to attract a renewed audience. These facts suggest that the community might be more fractured than it seems.

²⁵ “We wish for a re-centring of the general organisation of Mimos. These past few years, the festival has flirted with the artistic margins of mime too much.”

²⁶ Stating however that if the name had changed in 2014, the term “nouveau mime” would continue to represent the cultural and artistic project of the Centre. (“Centre du Nouveau Mime”).

²⁷ The two names literally translate as “mime and gestural arts” and “new mime”.

What the debates surrounding a redefinition of “mime” underlines is that, despite their marginal position, “arts du mime et du geste” are present – and alive – in France. There are “physical theatres” in France, they simply are not termed as such, nor do they easily sit in a discussion on “mime”. This is for example illustrated in the programming of Mimos, which “suit l’évolution du mime actuel dans toute sa diversité”, and does so “en présentant des formes novatrices dont le style est aux frontières du théâtre non verbal, de la danse contemporaine, de la lumière, des arts plastiques, du nouveau cirque” (“Mimos en bref”).²⁸ The way practitioners designate themselves goes in this direction, albeit illustrating the absence of cohesion that both the “manifesto” and the CNM publications lament: answers provided by practitioners to a survey issued in 2008 by the then Centre des arts du mime et du geste illustrate this absence of cohesion. To the question “[d]ans quel genre classeriez-vous votre compagnie?”²⁹ (Bonduelle et al., “Analyse” 5), the 75 companies and artists interrogated were offered a choice of twelve different answers: puppetry, mime, pantomime, corporeal mime (“mime corporel”), gestural theatre (“théâtre gestuel”), performance, theatre, dance-theatre, contemporary dance, hip-hop, circus arts, street performance and others.³⁰ The extent of this list (even including “others”) clearly emphasises the difficulty in defining the practice of these artists. But their answers are even more telling: only 10% of them consider their work as being mime, while 11% see it as theatre, and 24% as gestural theatre. Only 3% see their work as dance, and another 3% as dance-theatre. On the other hand, 6% of them associate their

²⁸ “Follows the evolution of current mime in all its diversity”; “presenting innovative forms at the frontiers of non-verbal theatre, contemporary dance, lighting design, visual art, new circus”.

²⁹ “In which genre would you classify your company?”

³⁰ Pantomime in French refers to a form of mime that “translates” a narrative into movement; the word “performance” in French only designates “performance art”; “hip-hop” refers to hip-hop dance.

work with circus, and 8% with street theatre.³¹ This association with the circus and street theatre networks is not without consequence, as I will soon analyse. It also illustrates how, while physical theatre in the UK operates as an “umbrella term” (see Graham and Hoggett’s definition for instance), mime is in French talked about as a category that overlaps with others but does not encompass them.

The desire to agree on a specific vocabulary, the plurality of microscopic terminologies, and the difficult rebirth of the term “mime” illustrate the particular position occupied by “physical theatres” in France. The Centre du Nouveau Mime’s organisers explain this situation by the fact that “aucune politique publique cohérente n’est encore mise en oeuvre” (*Mime* 2012, 2) for an “art sacrifié par l’absence d’expertise des collectivités” (“Centre du Nouveau Mime”).³² With little institutional representation, the genre and its associated guises of “théâtre corporel” or “théâtre gestuel” are marginalised and/or absorbed into broader genres like circus or street theatre. Whilst there are celebrated national schools for theatre, dance, circus and puppetry,³³ “mime” and related physical practices are not granted significant institutional credit. The situation is tentatively changing however, as exemplified with the opening for the academic year 2012-2013 of a “promotion internationale entièrement consacrée aux arts du mime et du geste” at the École Supérieure d’Art Dramatique of Paris (*Le*

³¹ The artists questioned belong to the mime and “théâtre gestuel” networks. The questionnaire was diffused with the help of institutions in charge of funding companies at a local level, and two organisations: L’Odyssée in Périgueux, dedicated to mime, and Hors Les Murs, focusing on street performance.

³² “No coherent public policy has yet been put in practice”, “an art form sacrificed by the absence of expertise at state level and within local authorities”.

³³ The ENSAC: École Nationale Supérieure des Arts du Cirque, and the ESNAM: École Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette, based in Charleville-Mézières, also home of the Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnette.

Concours 2012), one of the dozen of prestigious *écoles supérieures* dedicated to actor training.

Why is mime marginalised? A few hypotheses.

The difficult rebirth of the term “mime” epitomises France’s ambivalent position towards physical performance: while the term indeed includes what I have defined as “physical theatres”, the community’s desire to retract the boundaries of what “mime” encompasses exclude a certain amount of practices. The fact that its promotion as an appropriate terminology supposes, as expressed by GLAM in the “Manifeste”, “un lourd travail de médiation et de pédagogie” (6) also suggests that the type of work it designates runs the risk of being associated with “un terme réputé vider les salles” (6).³⁴ In these circumstances, the insistence on keeping the term is somehow surprising, but can perhaps be explained by a desire to salvage a perceived French “exception culturelle” that the prominent position of the French pioneers of mime emphasises.

Such insistence on reviving the term, and the discredit into which “mime” has fallen, are two sides of a same coin. The fact that France has fostered some of the most influential mime practitioners of the 20th century also means that these artists’ practice has solidified as canonical examples, which in turn has impeded their renewal. Indeed, the term does not have such negative connotations in languages other than French.³⁵ On this point, most commentators

³⁴ “A terminology that supposedly makes audiences flee the theatre”.

³⁵ A dimension also acknowledged in the “Manifesto”, which stipulates that “aux Pays-Bas, au Québec, en Grande-Bretagne, ... le mot continue de prospérer” (6) (“in the Netherlands, Québec, or the UK ... the word is still widely used”). The fact that the term is not as negatively connoted in French-speaking Canada underlines that its disuse in France might indeed be related to, on the one hand, the canonical position of Decroux and Marceau, and on the other hand, the way “physical theatres” are viewed specifically in the Hexagon.

are unequivocal: mime is still often associated with Marceau (Garcia 1; Loesener 4) and his white-faced character Bip, modern reminiscence of Pierrot, the “white man” of *fin-de-siècle* pantomimes (Bonduelle “Interview”). American mime artist Thomas Leabhart identifies how Marceau “hybridised some modern mime techniques with what is basically a 19th century romantic form of storytelling” (109). Turned toward a nostalgic past, Marceau’s technique is characterised by a formalism that does not allow its renewal.

How to explain the fact that audiences seem to mostly associate mime with Marceau whilst practitioners such as Decroux or Lecoq have had a more important and influential legacy on practitioners? Bonduelle provides insightful opinions on the matter: in the 80s and early 90s, Marceau was the only one granted institutional representation, receiving public funding for the International School of Mimodrame he created in 1978. Marceau’s omnipresence obscured other practitioners such as Decroux, whose relationship with success and the institutions was radically different: in Bonduelle’s words, Decroux was “anti-médiatique”, “un socialiste anarchiste” with a “caractère difficile” and “des relations conflictuelles avec l’État” (“Interview”).³⁶ Artistically and aesthetically, Decroux’s decisions also alienated him from the institutions and the main public. His “corporeal mime” technique tends to “l’épuration, nie la surcharge réaliste, privilégie l’émotion, se méfie du comique” (Lachaud and Maleval 17).³⁷ To these facts, Decroux’s “aversion to performing” has to be added, a characteristic Leabhart analyses as making “repeated viewings ... impossible” (17). Decroux’s work has therefore been “all but invisible, an underground art for an initiated

³⁶ “Anti-mediatic, an anarchist socialist”; “difficult temperament” and “contentious relationships with the State”.

³⁷ “Refinement, negates realism, gives privilege to emotion and is suspicious of comedy”.

few” (Leabhart 109). These factors contributed to Decroux’s invisibility, and by contrast, to Marceau’s omnipresence.

Jacques Lecoq’s situation is slightly different, firstly because his teachings cannot be formally classified as mime. The main difference between Lecoq and the former two lays in his openness and pluri-disciplinarity, a feature still very much present in the courses offered by the Jacques Lecoq International School today. Lecoq’s teachings take into account connections with the visual arts or architecture; they are also orientated toward training performers and not solely mime artists. This distance taken from both Marceau and Decroux was made apparent through a conscious decision to change the terminology at the school, abandoning “mime” to adopt “théâtre gestuel” and therefore mark a distancing from the formalism of Decroux and Marceau (Bonduelle; “Manifeste” 6). Significantly, Lecoq is the only one of the three who still has a school dedicated to his teachings and filiations – Marceau’s was shut in 2005. Despite this success abroad, and the attraction of the school for international students,³⁸ the school remains relatively unknown in France. This situation was exemplified recently, in reactions to Simon McBurney’s nomination as *artiste associé* of the 2012 Avignon festival. McBurney’s nomination put the Lecoq training in the light, and it appeared that several other artists who were present in Avignon that summer had also trained at the School. The “coincidence” was commented in those terms in *Télérama*, a leading cultural publication: “[m]ais qu’a donc inventé Jacques Lecoq pour que la crème des artistes internationaux ait choisi de faire ses classes chez lui?” (Gayot).³⁹ That such rhetoric shall be used when

³⁸ Many artists now working in the UK trained at Lecoq: Complicité’s Simon McBurney, Hoipolloi’s Shôn Dale-Jones, but also smaller companies such as Dancing Brick or Clout.

³⁹ “But what on earth did Jacques Lecoq invent, to convince the crème de la crème of international artists to study with him?”

mentioning Lecoq highlights how his legacy is still considered as marginal. David Bradby has noted how, for instance, “(a)lthough he spent the greater part of his working life in Paris, Lecoq was viewed by the Paris theatre establishment as an unorthodox outsider” (“The Legacy of Lecoq” 89; also qtd in Murray, *Jacques Lecoq* 56). For Bradby, this could be explained by the absence of any written protocol or treatise, a feature he acknowledges as “unusual in a theatre culture which ... still values new developments in theatre practice partly by the extent to which they give rise to ... theoretical discourses” (89). This position is echoed by Murray who analyses that “[i]f there was a degree of indifference to Lecoq’s work from French academics, this was partially due to the belief that he was “anti-intellectual”” (56). This latter dimension is important, for it crystallises the way theatre has long been, and to an extent remains, viewed in literary and intellectual terms in France. This characteristic contributes to marginalising practices where a text – either as score or as outside referent – does not prevail.

A very brief overview of circus and street performance

I have mentioned how artists working in “arts du mime et du geste” were often associated with the circus and/or street performance networks. Many practitioners participate in the annual street performance festival Châlons dans la rue, based in the Burgundy region. They are in this respect absorbed in wider networks of physical practices that have been granted institutional interest and are acknowledged as leading domains of the French performance industry. This is not surprising given that, first, France’s theatre culture remains heavily centred on textual and literary characteristics, and second, that France produces some of the most influential contemporary circus and “nouveau cirque”. In their edited

volume *Contemporary French Theatre and Performance*, Clare Finburgh and Carl Lavery appropriately term circus, after Emmanuel Wallon, “France’s most successful export” (2). The programme of the London International Mime Festival exemplifies this characteristic on a yearly basis, with an important number of artists coming from France (Website).⁴⁰ The Hexagon’s expertise in circus arts is also echoed by recent bi-national programmes – the current Interreg IV-PASS programme being an example - between organisations dedicated to circus in the North of France and similarly oriented organisations based in the South of England, aimed at exchanging skills between the two nations (“Crying Out Loud”).

Some of the companies involved in the exchange, of the likes of Camille Boitel’s L’Immédiat, do not acknowledge their work as circus per se. Neither do they promote it as mime, despite their programming in both the London International Mime Festival (in 2012) and Mimos (in 2010). If these companies’ work cannot formally be recognised as circus, it draws on circus training. Tellingly, unlike “arts du mime et du geste”, both circus and street arts are acknowledged institutionally. On the section of the Ministère de la Culture’s website dedicated to funding (the equivalent of the UK Arts Council’s funding opportunities), in 2012, work eligible for funding must be either “Théâtre”, “Arts de la rue”, “Arts du cirque” and “Création Artistique Multimédia”.⁴¹ Mime is on the other hand listed as one of many types of performance that can be used to

⁴⁰ Including for instance “bearded lady” Jeanne Mordoj in 2010, or Aurélien Bory and Mathurin Bolze for its 2011 edition. In view of the current situation for “arts du mime et du geste” in France, it is exemplary that artists programmed in a British festival dedicated to mime shall be in France labelled as circus. These denominations are, of course, artificial and binary; yet they highlight how such practices are considered in either context (“London International Mime Festival”).

⁴¹“theatre”, “street arts”, “circus arts”, “multimedial artistic creation”. An altogether different section of the website is dedicated to dance.

compose “dramaturgie plurielle”, itself a sub-heading of the “Théâtre” section. The expression “dramaturgie plurielle” epitomises the way “physical theatres” are thought of in French: it consists of a “texte dramatique inspiré par des références qui ne sont pas uniquement celles de la littérature”. To be eligible for funding, companies must provide evidence of “textes même s’ils ne sont ni systématiquement littéraires ni purement linguistiques” (“Aide à la création”).⁴² This terminology used to describe performances that resist a textual dimension is characteristic of the French context, and I argue participates in relegating practices where no “text” is offered to a marginal position. While a predominant position of text in British theatre led to the emergence of alternatives in the form of “physical theatres” (Chamberlain, *Jacques Lecoq 5*), the French context is still heavily marked by the marginalisation of these physical practices.

A few words on dance

An investigation in the field of “physical theatre” in France has highlighted the absence of a similar term in French and the ambiguous position of what is included under the banner “mime”. It also underlines the absorption of physical performance practices into other types of “dramaturgie plurielle” such as circus and street arts. Whilst only little room can be dedicated to observing the position of dance within the French performance landscape and its relationship with the aforementioned genres, a brief overview is nonetheless necessary to better trace the position of physical practices in the French context, especially given the connections in the UK between physical theatre and dance-theatre.

⁴²“plural dramaturgy”; “a dramatic text inspired by references that can be other than literary”; “texts, even if they are not systematically literary or purely linguistic”.

In the wake of the events of May 1968, the process of “décentralisation chorégraphique”, based on the model of the “décentralisation théâtrale” is initiated. The “décentralisation théâtrale”, initiated in 1946, is a state policy aiming to extend the creation and diffusion of work outside Paris, in an effort to democratise access to theatrical production. It led to the creation of, among other things, state-subsidised Centres Dramatiques Nationaux, embedded in each region and for which an artistic director is elected every three years.⁴³ Georgiana Gore, Laurence Louppe and Wilfride Piollet, in an article titled “Effervescence and Tradition in French Dance”, note how the movement of “décentralisation théâtrale” “prefigured not only André Malraux’s [then Culture Minister] Maisons de la Culture (regional arts centre)” but also the Centres Chorégraphiques Nationaux (29). Gore et al. add that “[i]t was within the Maisons de la Culture and on the theatrical circuit that independent modern dance companies ... were able to present their work in the 1960s” (29). They then acknowledge a shift in the 1980s, also noted by Marianne Filloux-Vigreux in a publication on the relationship between dance and the institutions, while Jack Lang was Culture Minister (Filloux-Vigreux 191). Between 1983 and 1998, 19 “Centres Chorégraphiques Nationaux” were created, either ex-nihilo or as a continuation of the resident companies’ presence. Each CCN aims at facilitating the creation, programming and diffusion of work by resident artists and invited companies. The time spent by Lang as Culture Minister, from 1981 till 1993, was marked by these efforts toward the popularisation and accessibility of culture. Gore et al. analyse repercussions of this tendency in the development of what they term a “strong decorative trend” in French dance, which “emphasized the primacy or

⁴³ See for example Bradby and Poincheval: *Le Théâtre en France de 1968 à 2000*, and Robert Abirached ed. *La Décentralisation Théâtrale*.

the intrinsically spectacular elements [such as the costumes, the set...] at the expense of choreographic writing and resources of the body” (37).

This was concomitant in the 1980s with an increase of American influences on French dance (and French culture in general), and with what Gore et al. identify as “little training, pressures to produce prolifically, and overexposure by the media” (32). Gore et al. trace two main trends in dance of the 1980s and 1990s: the first one, spectacular, mediatised, often self-taught, proposes work in accordance with commercial diffusion but which compositional formula does not question or criticise “the relationship between choreographic process, dance structure and constructions of the body” (28). The second trend, subterranean, is composed of choreographers who master the tools and knowledge but remain invisible (40). Since the 1990s however the apparition of the idea that choreography “owes its justification to exploratory work on the body and the material of dance” emerged, leading to what Gore et al. call the “renewal of avant-garde attitude” (41) as opposed to the deliberate seduction of the audience that prevailed in the 1990s. One main trend French dance is associated with, in the 2000s, the so-called “non-danse” of choreographers such as Xavier Le Roy or Jérôme Bel, stems from such exploration and mastery of choreographic tools, that are challenged and questioned in shows which seem to display very little “dance”.

In the early 2000s, the date when both Filloux-Vigreux’s book and Gore et al.’s article were written, it was still difficult for dance to find platforms of diffusion in France outside of the CCNs or specialised venues. Institutionally, the 2000s have seen a consolidation of what had been initiated, with more funding dedicated to independent companies, the development of the Centre National de

la Danse in Pantin, near Paris (created in 1998), and efforts to promote creation, diffusion and training. However, Gore et al. state in 2000 that dance “has not been granted any theoretical importance, and it is still considered as minor in that aspect” (36). The situation is similarly identified by Toni D’Amelio who, in an article on “non-danse”, mentions that “[u]nlike in the Anglo-Saxon university system, where dance has been a discipline since the 1930s, dance has had a very recent presence in French academe” (98). The situation remained very similar a decade onwards: in 2009, only seven universities propose a dance studies course, and among them, just three offer PhD programmes (“Danse à l’Université” 4). Initiatives are taken to develop resources and a network for academic researchers focusing on dance, as illustrated in a platform hosted by the Centre National de la Danse and run by PhD candidates. However, the existence of this platform also underlines the current position of dance within French academia:

Plus de quatre-vingts étudiants en thèse, ... ont choisi la danse comme objet de recherche. ... Actuellement, une minorité (une quinzaine) est rattachée à des départements ou à des centres de recherche qui reconnaissent les études en danse comme une discipline universitaire autonome. La plupart d’entre eux travaillent dans des laboratoires d’anthropologie, d’histoire, de philosophie, de sociologie, de sciences sociales et sportives, de littérature comparée, etc. En France, la danse n’est encore que rarement un champ d’étude autonome : elle est un objet pluriel et varié dont l’étude est disséminée dans les différentes UFR et

universités françaises. (“Qui sommes-nous”)⁴⁴

On the other hand, the influence of dance studies, coming from English-speaking countries, and an interest in the anthropology of dance are slowly arising in academic institutions, as exemplified by the project from Bibliothèque Nationale de France to publish a “guide des sources bibliographiques sur la danse dans les collections patrimoniales de la *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*”.⁴⁵

I suggest that this absence of dance studies from academic departments owes to the fact that the study of non-textual practices, that resist discourse, remains problematic for an academic – and artistic – culture still so centred on the idea of the text. This position is indeed mirrored by the prevalence of textual referents in dance training, and in creation. In Marie-Françoise Bouchon’s words:

[q]ue ce soit comme art ou comme pratique, c’est toujours par comparaison ou par opposition qu’elle se définit. Les principes convoqués pour élaborer une théorie de l’art de la danse sont toujours empruntés à d’autres arts. (96)⁴⁶

⁴⁴ “More than 80 PhD students ... have chosen dance as their topic of research. ... To this day, only a minority of them (approximately 15) are affiliated to departments or research centres that acknowledge dance studies as an autonomous academic discipline. The majority of them work instead in anthropology, history, philosophy, sociology, social sciences and sport studies, comparative literature departments. Dance in France is still only rarely considered an autonomous field of research: it is a plural and varied topic the study of which is dispersed across different departments and French universities”.

⁴⁵ A “guide of bibliographical sources on dance in the patrimonial collections of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*”. Tellingly, more than half the works suggested in the “bibliographie selective” suggested by the BnF in May 2009, in parallel to the project, is written in English.

⁴⁶ “Whether it is as art form or as practice, it is always defined either by comparison or by opposition. The principles invoked to elaborate a theory of the art of dance are always borrowed from other arts”.

This is a similar feature that Gore et al. identify in the work of French choreographers, for whom they analyse “the inevitable recourse to an outside referent” such as cinema, literature or painting (33). They also note a difficulty for choreographers in positioning themselves within their own field of work, an issue they attribute to “the dominance of predominantly literary sources or reference” (37). Toni D’Amelio highlights what she identifies as “the activity of reflection” she sees as being typically French and that she argues affects dance (97), which is often conceived of in conceptual terms, and informed by them.⁴⁷ Despite major recent changes that contribute to constructing dance as an independent artistic and academic field, perspectives about dance are only starting to include developments that, on the other hand, have been solidified in English-speaking scholarship for the past twenty-five years.

The fact that dance remains marginal in academic institutions illustrates how it is still often perceived in the French context as an art form that supposedly resists discourse. Similarly, performance endeavours that challenge boundaries and borrow from dance, live or visual arts, are spoken about in terms that emphasise their distancing from the *text*. This is one of the reasons for the so-called “crisis” of the 2005 edition of the Avignon festival. The festival organisers, Hortense Archambault and Vincent Baudriller, commissioned Flemish performance-maker Jan Fabre as *artiste associé* and programmed the work of experimental artists such as Gisèle Vienne, Pascal Rambert or Romeo Castellucci. The “crisis” emerged from the audience’s reactions to a series of challenging and formally innovative works, but more importantly, seemed to be

⁴⁷ *nom donné par l’auteur* (1992) by Jérôme Bel, inspired by the work of Roland Barthes, Nasser Martin-Gousset’s *Péplum* (2008), in reference to the cinematographic genre, or Le Roy’s *Le Sacre du printemps* (2007) where the dancer, facing the audience, conducts an imaginary orchestra, are all examples of this dimension.

fuelled by an important amount of critiques in national newspapers that proclaimed some of these productions epitomised a “défaite absolue du théâtre” (qtd in Adolphe 123). Tellingly, the nomination of Fabre as *artiste associé* had already triggered bitter criticism, as Jean-Marc Adolphe remarks when, quoting major newspapers, he says that “[a]vant même que l’édition 2005 n’ait commencé, la grogne couvait en sourdine: horreur et sacrilège, la danse prenait toute la place”. Adolphe notes how dance in this case seemed to stand for “tout ce qui n’est pas du *théâtre véritable*”.⁴⁸ Adolphe’s comments are extracted from his contribution to *Le Cas Avignon 2005: Regards critiques*. This volume, hastily published in the aftermath of the festival, offers critical responses to the “events”. Adolphe is one of the authors who castigates what he terms “la faiblesse du traitement critique de ce Festival”.⁴⁹ The Avignon 2005 crisis is significant for my argument: it crystallises how work that draws on what Adolphe sees as a postdramatic tradition (124) has been, until that edition of the festival, mainly ignored by French critics. Adolphe argues that it is a similar attitude that explains what he terms the late discovery in France of companies such as The Wooster Group or la Fura dels Baus, which he labels a “part non-vue, refoulée”.⁵⁰ It is significant that works that did not seem to fit within the boundaries of “theatre” were received with such reactionary criticism, and that they should have been associated with this other medium that resists discourse that is dance. These examples illustrate how the study and production of physical and movement-based practices in France still remains indebted to a literary and a textual approach; they also highlight that, whilst French theatre can be resolutely

⁴⁸ “Even before the start of the 2005 edition, a muted rumbling discontent could be heard in the background: horror and sacrilege, dance was taking up all the space.”

⁴⁹ “The weakness of the way this Festival was covered by critics”.

⁵⁰ “An element that is invisible, suppressed”.

experimental, it often continues to owe to a predominance of text over other mediums.

“Créations collectives”

I stated earlier in this thesis that, historically, “physical theatres” have been associated with a political agenda in the UK. If companies making “physical theatres” are still seen as models of alternative organisation and as practical applications of political ideals, their work rarely deals straightforwardly with political questions. There are of course notable exceptions: Nic Green’s *Trilogy* (2009) is a piece of devised and physical performance constructed around radical feminist discourses, and DV8’s latest shows, *To Be Straight With You* (2008) and *Can We Talk About This?* (2012) both deal with political issues in a way that merges verbatim theatre and contemporary dance. However, the vast majority of recent “physical theatres” productions in the UK tends to shy away from political commitment, as noted in 2011 by critic and practitioner Brian Logan. Logan notes that if political topics tend to be ignored by many devised theatre practitioners, “its mode of engagement shouldn’t be overlooked” (“And The Horse”). The rhetoric applied to devised performance is thus that the political might not be included in the fiction, but it is embedded by default in its organisation and modes of representation. Given the marginal position of equivalent “physical theatres” in France, especially in comparison with the success of similar practices in the UK, the question of their connection with alternative political discourses is made more acute.

A precise and exhaustive history of *créations collectives* is beyond the scope of this thesis.⁵¹ However, a brief overview is needed: first, since I understand “physical theatres” as encompassing devised processes, and since no terminology is available in French to literally translate “devised theatres”, it seems essential to examine how collaborative creative processes are framed. Examples abound of artists who decide to work collectively; however, when it is framed as *création collective*, it is also often associated with a political dimension. This can be partially attributed to the historical relationship of *créations collectives* with a political and usually radically left-wing commitment; it also suggests that to work as a collective in France often has political undertones absent from British examples. The emergence of *créations collectives* in French theatre history owes to the events of May 1968, which affected all areas of French public, political, cultural, intellectual and social life. Theatre was not exempt, as exemplified in the Déclaration de Villeurbanne, publicised in the 25th May 1968. Signed by the 34 directors of state-funded theatres (“théâtres subventionnés”), this Déclaration “fera ... point de reference pour toute discussion sur le rôle du théâtre dans la société pendant les années 70” (Bradby and Poincheval 17).⁵² Importantly for my discussion, the Déclaration set the bases for a definition of culture as “entreprise de *politisation*” (“Déclaration”, qtd in Bradby and Poincheval 18), as opposed to the mere transmission of a canon of culture. If the Déclaration actually had little effect on state-funded institutions, it illustrated and inspired a movement of “remise en cause de la hiérarchie des rapports sociaux vis-à-vis de la culture” combined with the “utopie d’un monde

⁵¹ For an extensive overview, see Bradby and Poincheval *Le Théâtre en France de 1968 à 2000*.

⁵² “Will subsequently be taken as a point of reference, throughout the 1970s, for any discussion about the role of theatre in society”.

où la créativité serait généralisée dans la masse de la population”, set the stage for part of the “force d’attraction” of *créations collectives* (19).⁵³

Bradby and Poincheval, following Robert Abirached, identify three areas of the French theatrical life where the impact of May 68 was felt (20). One is constituted of the state-funded institutions that Bradby and Poincheval see as having been little impacted by the Déclaration. The second, described by Bradby and Poincheval as “théâtre-provocation”, was influenced by the protest movement promoted by the American avant-garde, notably the Bread and Puppet and the Living Theater.⁵⁴ The third one, the “théâtre amateur et universitaire” gave rise to examples of *créations collectives* that were going to be successful beyond the early 1970s. Bradby and Poincheval note that the aftermath of the Spring 1968 was a time where “les frontières entre théâtre universitaire, théâtre amateur et théâtre professionnel sont moins étanches que jamais” (40).⁵⁵ If this feature is far from being as prominent in France today, it seems on the other hand to be a characteristic of the alternative theatre scene in the UK, with many companies emerging from universities rather than from acting courses.⁵⁶ Bradby and Poincheval point out that “théâtre universitaire” became in this period oriented towards creating a total theatre, in an Artaudian sense, that encompasses the physical. In this respect, post-1968 “théâtre universitaire” is positioned in a

⁵³ “Endeavour to *politicise* people”, “questioning of the hierarchical organisation of social relationships vis a vis culture”; “a utopic vision of a world where creativity would be generalised in the mass of the people”; |force of attraction”.

⁵⁴ The first performance in France of the Living Theater took place in 1966 (Bradby and Poincheval 21), and Julian Beck was present during the occupation of the Théâtre de l’Odéon, taken as a symbol of bourgeois art (Kershaw *The Radical* 99).

⁵⁵ “The frontiers between “théâtre universitaire” (the equivalent of UK universities drama societies), amateur theatre and professional theatre are more porous than ever.”

⁵⁶ It is also significant that the companies that belong to these networks often tour in performance spaces offered by universities with a performing arts department. These spaces occasionally constitute simultaneously a resource for the department, and a venue for the general public: this is the case of the Gulbenkian Theatre at University of Kent, The Showroom at Chichester University, LICA at Lancaster University or the Warwick Arts Centre at Warwick University, among others. It is also interesting to see that university courses seem to foster the creation of companies as much as of individual performers.

clear opposition to what it had been in the past, that is, in Bradby and Poincheval's terms: "des groupes d'amateurs enthousiastes qui tentent une mise en scène du répertoire dont on leur fait faire l'analyse dans leurs cours" (40).⁵⁷ Both emerging from the "théâtre universitaire" milieu, two of the most exemplary companies constructed on such a collaborative model experienced increased inventiveness and popularity after the May 68 events: the Théâtre du Soleil and the Théâtre de l'Aquarium, both created in 1964 (Bradby and Poincheval 50, 76) wholly embraced a collective mode of organisation after 1968. The Théâtre du Soleil's performance *Les Clowns* (1969), that bears the mark of Ariane Mnouchkine's experience at the École Jacques Lecoq (Bradby and Poincheval 52, 57), is indeed the first one credited on the company's website as "création collective du Théâtre du Soleil" ("Théâtre du Soleil"). This mode of organisation echoed these companies' political commitment: at the Théâtre du Soleil for instance, wages are still equally distributed between all participants, regardless of their position (Bradby and Poincheval 50).

This overview inscribes *créations collectives* alongside a politicised perspective. It is not my aim to trace the genealogy of *créations collectives* until the first decade of the 21st century; simply, a brief glance towards contemporary expressions of collective devising underlines that a political commitment continues to be part of the rhetoric of many contemporary companies.⁵⁸ The now

⁵⁷ "Groups of enthusiastic amateurs who attempt a performance of the repertoire that they study in their courses".

⁵⁸ Especially so since the decision to be organised as a company is not prevalent in France. The *intermittent du spectacle* status has partially led to the rarefaction of permanent companies, for, as explained by Bradby and Poincheval, it is more economically sound for a performer to be *intermittent* than to work on a long-term basis with the same company. Theatres on the other hand prefer hiring companies or freelance performers on a project-to-project basis, instead of funding a whole permanent company in residence (664). Paradoxically, in Britain where such *intermittent* status does not exist, a similar situation is encountered, albeit justifying, according to Govan et al., the very organisation of companies working in devised theatre: "[t]his form of collaboration ... supports the commercial viability of companies where they employ freelance

dismantled Collectif D'Ores et déjà, for example, describe their work processes in terms which would be very familiar to a devised theatre audience in the UK but which sound unusual in a French context, with an emphasis on improvisation and an absence of "oeuvre dramatique préexistante à la création",⁵⁹ in director Sylvain Creuzevault's words (6). Creuzevault explains that the move from pre-existing texts to a more collaborative, collective and improvisational process stemmed from the "questionnement permanent de la compagnie ... sur le théâtre politique, sur la façon dont il peut prendre forme aujourd'hui" (6).⁶⁰ Significantly, one of the productions the company is most known for, *Notre Terreur* (2009), deals straightforwardly with the political: exploring the "Terreur" period that followed the French Revolution, focusing more specifically on the last moments of Robespierre.

Other examples of "collectifs" corroborate this intersection of a political dimension with an artistic and administrative structure: the strong left wing message of these companies' shows, as exemplified by Moukden-Théâtre's *Chez les nôtres* (2010), a piece of verbatim theatre about political commitment, T.O.C.'s performance of "le collectif au travail"⁶¹ (Rousseau qtd in "Le renouveau du collectif") or company F71's ongoing reflexion on Michel Foucault's militantism, is matched by the administrative organisation of these companies. Indeed, in all three examples and like several fringe theatre companies in Britain, the artists also carry out administrative tasks, a decision often essential for companies' economic survival and that is also often justified

practitioners ... to support their core team rather than offering expensive permanent contracts" (4).

⁵⁹ "Script or play existing prior to the creation".

⁶⁰ "A permanent interrogation, from the company, ... about political theatre, and the forms it can take nowadays".

⁶¹ "The collective at work".

by a desire to remain independent.⁶² If in the UK, the collective organisation of devised theatre companies is often cited as an example of a more democratic, horizontal relationship, whilst topics shy away from political commitment and forms of creative process have been integrated in a more traditional part of the industry, on the other side of the Channel, similar organisation is almost always marked by a political dimension and represented as a militant endeavour.

Political theatres

This relationship between “physical theatres” and a political dimension is an important one for my argument. As I will develop later on, there is a connection between the alternative embodied experience that “physical theatres” enable, and the modes of creation and association that they suggest – on an embodied level – that challenge dominant forms of political organisation. In the case of *créations collectives*, such a relationship highlights how these forms are in France currently thought of in terms of their political objectives and models of alternative organisation, while they themselves are somehow marginal, if not in popularity, at least in number.⁶³ This suggests that the relative marginalisation of “physical theatres” in France can make them a rich terrain for politically engaged content. In this respect, some of these “physical theatres” cross paths with what Bérénice Hamidi-Kim has termed a “revival of political-struggle theatre” that she claims France is experiencing (45). On the other hand, Finburgh and Lavery highlight a tendency of French theatre to be “frequently politically neutralized”,

⁶² I am indebted to Fanny Gayard for discussing these questions with me and introducing me to the work of these companies.

⁶³ The success of D’Ores et déjà illustrates that the company was not invisible, yet this success is often spoken of in terms that underlines the collective’s exceptional position in the French context.

a characteristic they attribute to the fact that it is also “aesthetically avant-garde” (11). The authors argue that struggle in French theatre happens through formal experimentations. This statement is illustrated by the second category of political theatre that Hamidi-Kim identifies and that she terms “post-political theatre”. This trend, “first and foremost a metadiscursive theatre”, is characterised by “an aesthetics based on the disruption and disintegration of the character, of any coherent vision of the world, of the dramatic fable, and of the history of theatre” (43). In this respect, the presence of a political content, albeit “post-political”, is far from being exceptional on French stages, in a way that is perhaps less systematically present in its British counterpart.⁶⁴

It is undeniable that an important part of French contemporary theatre, and especially playwriting, experiments with and at the limits of what is representable, making work that is aesthetically innovative and demanding. When Noëlle Renaude works towards “mettre en scène l’espace de l’écriture elle-même” (Bradby and Poincheval 663)⁶⁵ and Valère Novarina’s experiments with a theatre that is literary and textual, yet in which words are infused with the corporeality of the actor who utters them,⁶⁶ formal experimentations stand in lieu of a more straightforward political message. It is not accidental, I believe, that these authors, very successful in France, should experiment with language and text before other mediums. Similarly, Finburgh and Lavery point out that “French theatre criticism is considerably more apolitical than its Anglophone counterpart” (5): indeed, critics “tend to invest in a largely structuralist analysis

⁶⁴ The success in France of Rodrigo García, Howard Barker or Edward Bond, exemplifies French theatre’s internationalism (Finburgh and Lavery 13; Bradby and Delgado *The Paris Jigsaw*), and illustrates this tendency.

⁶⁵ “to stage the space of writing itself”. On the work of Renaude, see Finburgh: “Politics of Translating”.

⁶⁶ See Bradby and Poincheval (542), Josephine Machon (46).

that focuses on microtextual stylistic elements, rather than on macrotextual external factors such as history, society, geography and psychoanalysis” (5). Following Finburgh and Lavery’s call for “a political reading of form in theatre”, after the “formalistic reading of political theatre” that they identify in French criticism (13), this thesis aims to pursue such “political reading of form” in analysing the experimentations of contemporary theatre-makers who question the conditions of representation prevalent in French theatre, providing an embodied alternative experience of performance that suggests different forms of organisation.

Linguistic explanations

I have highlighted how the French language lacks a terminology to circumscribe “physical theatres”, a characteristic which leads to the relative invisibility of these practices in the French context. I also noted that French criticism tends to be concerned with what Finburgh and Lavery have termed “microtextual” elements more than its British counterpart that often focuses on a “macrotextual” analysis. I argue that one of the reasons for this difference is to be found in the way each theatre culture is informed and shaped by language.

This argument is echoed by Patrice Pavis on the one hand, as a French critic currently working and writing in the UK, and Toni D’Amelio on the other, an American who, in her own words, has been “[a] resident of France for the better part of 20 years” (89). Both offer insightful contributions to mapping out the gaps between the ways the two cultures understand and speak of performance. D’Amelio suggests that some *faux amis* in English and in French crystallise this particularity. D’Amelio describes *faux amis* as “words which may

be written the same and pronounced similarly”, but that “cunningly mask diverse meanings” (90). D’Amelio draws on the differences between the French *prémisse* and the English *premise*, suggesting that the former “has a predominantly philosophical register” (90) whereas the latter encompasses a more pragmatic dimension. D’Amelio suggests that “the diverse ways a common seed has grown reveal the direction to which each culture tends to turn”, adding that “the pair of almost-homonyms *premise/prémisse* offers insights into the signature turnings of English and French cultures” (90). Pavis, offering to draw parallels and comparisons between the words and concepts attached to the French *mise en scène* and the English *performance*, suggests in the same way that these differences “nous obligent à penser l’interprétation d’une représentation et la conception du théâtre” (44).⁶⁷

D’Amelio’s and Pavis’ remarks acknowledge how two seemingly close languages provide terms that are un-translatable. Both their analyses also highlight how the two languages shape the ways theatre is thought of in each context. As much as there is no equivalent in French to speak about physical, devised or site-specific theatre (Pavis *La Mise en scène contemporaine* 50), there is no adequate term with which to translate *performance*, only used in French to describe what the English calls “performance art”. Pavis notes that the term is usually translated in French as *représentation*, which “ne rend pas le sens du mot anglais et trahit une toute autre manière de voir les choses” (45).⁶⁸ Pavis provides an explanation for this terminological, and subsequently, philosophical discrepancy between the two languages. I argue that it is a similar dynamic that

⁶⁷ “Force us to think about the interpretation of a performance and a whole conception of theatre”.

⁶⁸ “Does not render the meaning of the English word and implies a totally different way of understanding things”.

makes *performance* impossible to translate into French that also makes “physical theatre” terminologically and thus conceptually invisible. Pavis, like Finburgh and Lavery, highlights how French theatre, from both a practitioner’s and a scholarly perspective, remains formalist and heavily informed by a philosophical approach. When the 1960s -70s marked the emergence of physical theatre in the UK and the USA, in France, “[on] ne parvient pas à trouver à ce corps un successeur sur la scène” (49).⁶⁹ Whilst Anglophone countries embrace post-structuralism and postmodernism in the 1970s, in France on the other hand “le rejet de la théorie dans les milieux du spectacle fait passer les théoriciens comme les praticiens à côté des *cultural studies*, de la *critical theory* et du *poststructuralism*” (49).⁷⁰ Pavis notes that, as a consequence, “le théâtre ne profite pas de cette vague interculturelle et postcoloniale” (50)⁷¹ that touches the UK, a situation that only started to change in the mid-2000s (50) with still a certain degree of suspicion held in academic circles against cultural studies, gender studies and postcolonialism.⁷² On the other hand, Pavis argues that,

⁶⁹ “The body that is at the heart of these debates is not given a successor on stage”.

⁷⁰ “The rejection of theory in the performing arts means that theoreticians as much as practitioners missed the emergence of *cultural studies*, *critical theory* and *poststructuralism*”. This is rather surprising considering the importance of literary and philosophical referents in French performance practices.

⁷¹ “Theatre does not benefit from this intercultural and postcolonial wave”.

⁷² University Paris VIII was for example in 2012 “l’un des rares centres de recherche universitaire habilité à délivrer des diplômes” (“one of few academic department able to deliver degrees”) in the field of gender and feminist studies (Website). Questions surrounding postcolonialism as a discipline have been at the core of heated debates in French academia recently, as exemplified by the publication of Jean-François Bayart’s *Les Études postcoloniales: Un carnaval académique* (2010) and the counter-attack developed in the collectively authored *Ruptures postcoloniales* (2010) that reasserts the necessity of a postcolonial approach. There is an evident issue here, especially in a country that, in Finburgh and Lavery’s words, “remains troubled by the racial and spatial problems that the end of the Algerian war brought into sharp focus” (7), and considering France’s position as a dominant colonial and arguably neo-colonial power. The intricacies of the postcolonial debate in France are beyond the scope of this thesis, and a summary would not do justice to the complexities of the way the discipline is perceived in the Hexagon.

instead, French theatre “reste attaché à l’univers littéraire, élitiste et artistique des textes et à l’universalité du théâtre occidental” (50).⁷³

Since, as also argued by Murray, “the significance of the body in late twentieth-century Western culture ... permeates the discourses” of cultural studies (*Lecoq* 4), it is not surprising that it should have been “forgotten” in French criticism along with aforementioned disciplines. This is even more surprising given the preponderance of French philosophers and sociologists, from Foucault to Bourdieu, who have developed a discourse on and about the body that was influential outside of France. *Performance studies* are also absent from most of the French academic landscape, apart from a few scientific endeavours that mirror the Anglo-American field. Université Paris VIII hosts for instance the research group dedicated to the discipline coined by Jean-Marie Pradier: *ethnoscénologie*, which counts Eugenio Barba as one of its members. *Ethnoscénologie* is “based on the need to avoid any form of ethnocentrism in the study of performing arts and practices in their cultural, historical and social contexts” (“Ethnoscénologie”). Characterised by a pluri-disciplinary approach, it takes into consideration practical and embodied knowledge as much as academic research, integrating a phenomenological dimension.

Similarly pluri-disciplinary, the field of *EthnoPoétique*, hosted by the Université Denis Diderot – Paris VII, “a pour objet la pragmatique des textes – ou mieux, des discours – qu’elle étudie sans les dissocier des corps et des voix qui les énoncent; ni des conditions d’énonciation culturellement définies” (“Projet

⁷³ “remains attached to the literary, elitist and artistic world of texts and to the universality of Western theatre”.

scientifique”).⁷⁴ The research group is directed by Florence Dupont, whose research focuses on an anthropology of Greek and Roman Antiquity – including theatre - arguing that Classic Studies have been constructed on an ill-informed projection of contemporary societies’ perspectives on Greek and Roman societies. Dupont calls for a taking into consideration of these societies through an anthropological lens rather than establishing a genealogy by default.⁷⁵ It is not fortuitous that some of Dupont’s most recent publications, namely *Aristote ou le vampire du théâtre occidental* (2007), were strongly criticised for, amongst other, attacking text as a repository of Western theatre.⁷⁶ If these enterprises illustrate that theatre studies in France are not monolithic, their exceptionality emphasises however that they are not dominant in French academic circles, which remain heavily marked by formalism and an attachment to a literary and textual dimension.

The Case studies

Drawing the outlines of the French context illustrates how “physical theatres” are perceived, and it underlines the conditions that suppose their unclassifiable position. This overview highlights that a “physical theatres”

⁷⁴ “Has as its object the pragmatics of texts – or rather, discourses – that as a discipline it studies without dissociating them from the bodies and voices that enounce them; nor from the culturally defined conditions of their enunciation”.

⁷⁵ Dupont suggests for example a reconsideration of Greek and Latin canonical literature not as texts, but as oral endeavours.

⁷⁶ Dupont is aware of being at a counter-current to the dominant discourse in Theatre Studies and her tone is consciously provocative. In an article published by *Le Monde des livres* in October 2007, Denis Guénoun argues back, saying that actors are often “exaltés du poème, de la phrase et du dire” (“impassioned by the poem, by phrasing and by the act of speaking”), and that acting is “jouer avec les mots, les idées – et les sentiments ou les émotions, bien sûr” (“play with words, ideas – and feelings and emotions, of course”), adding that “le corps pense, il interprète, il comprend et donne à comprendre, il sémantise et critique les significations” (“the body thinks, it interprets, understands and allows understanding, semantises and criticises significations”) (“Merci Aristote”). Guénoun’s discourse on the body, objectified yet spoken about in literary terms, is exemplary of the field Dupont attacks.

paradigm can be applied to physical practices that exist in the French context but remain unnamed or invisible as “physical theatres”. The fact that “physical theatres” should not be framed as such suggests a different attitude towards their existence, and in reverse, a specific position of “physical theatres”-makers with the overall context where their work is produced. Drawing on both theatre contexts but in a way that cannot pretend to be exhaustive, the comparison at the core of this thesis is more specifically focused on four case studies, equally divided between the two national contexts. Each case study proposes a different perspective on the research questions deployed in the thesis, and opens a window into the wider contexts from which they are extracted. The order of the chapters reflects the development of this research from case study to case study. Each artist and/or company’s work influenced the directions this thesis followed; as such, the argument evolved chronologically, with the notable exception of the case study that appears last, for reasons I explain below.

Escale

The first company whose work is explored in this thesis, in Chapter 3, is the French-based “théâtre gestuel” company Escal. Founded and represented by Franco-German couple, Grit Krausse and Hugues Hollenstein, the company spent most of the past twenty years on the (rural) roads of France. Escal describe their work in words that match the rhetoric used by practitioners of “physical theatres” in the UK: they make a “théâtre total”, that “repousse[] les frontières du théâtre, du mime, de la danse, du cirque et du théâtre d'objet”.⁷⁷ Their work encompasses most of these genres and additional physical skills are

⁷⁷ “Pushes further boundaries of theatre, mime, dance, circus and object theatre”.

acquired for each production. Escale is also characterised by *itinérance*: owning two marquees and living in caravans, the company would, until recently, spend most of a year on the roads. Hollenstein and Krausse are now more or less sedentary but continue to live in the caravan they have used as a home for the past fifteen years. The company's *itinérance* is central to an understanding of Escale's work, for the way it has informed the company's history and continues to influence the way Escale produce and speak about their work. The company indeed acknowledge themselves as being both "théâtre du mouvement" and "théâtre en mouvement", two qualities they see as mutually informative.⁷⁸

Because of their interdisciplinary approach and their focus on physicality before text, Escale represent a perfect example to explore the way "physical theatres" are made and performed in the French context. Their position within this context and their *itinérance* mean that Escale operate on the margins, geographical as much as generic, of French theatre culture. However, within alternative networks, most notably the street performance network, certainly due to their *itinérant* lifestyle and the outdoor nature of their performances, Escale occupy a rather visible position. Hugues Hollenstein was for example elected as director of the Centre International pour les Théâtres Itinérants several years in a row, and their name is often associated with The Footsbarn Travelling Theatre or Théâtre du Mouvement, which have both achieved notoriety beyond borders.⁷⁹ The central position of a political message in Escale's lifestyle and in their creations also inflected my perspectives on the potential for subversion of "physical theatres" in France, linked to the way they use movement. However, if

⁷⁸ "Theatre of movement" and "theatre in movement".

⁷⁹ The inclusion of an article by Dick McCaw, focusing on Claire Heggen from Théâtre du Mouvement's devising principles, in Keefe and Murray's *Critical Reader* (9), illustrates this notoriety.

Escale are very vocal in promoting a radical, Left-wing message, they remain dependent on public funding for a large amount of their work, which problematises their self-acknowledged marginality.

Researching Escale's work meant I also had to research their lifestyle, for the two are intimately intertwined. When the company agreed to my presence in their rehearsals of a reprise of *Est ou Ouest*, in November 2009, I travelled to their settlement near Tours, in the North-West of France, and stayed there for a few days. Given the remote location of Escale's settlement, and especially my total dependence on their means of locomotion, attending Escale's rehearsals and researching the company's archive meant staying on the premises, hosted in one of the caravans at the end of a dewy field. An evident benefit of this situation was that I was given access to video footage of most of Escale's past performances, which I could discuss with both Hollenstein and Krause immediately after seeing. This, the aforementioned transport dependence and the company's apparent keenness in sharing their processes and reflexions,⁸⁰ along with the age difference between myself – then in my mid-twenties – and Hollenstein and Krause – in their late forties - all led to transforming the observation process into a reflexive research process that encompassed a *felt* dimension, not dissimilar to the fieldwork of ethnographic research. In this respect, my work on Escale informed, from its early stages, the methodology I have used throughout this thesis.

⁸⁰ One of the company's concerns, albeit mostly voiced by Hollenstein, has to do with what he perceives as a lack of public and institutional recognition. Presumably, my presence and interest as a researcher, and especially as a researcher based in the UK, was one of the reasons why the company received me and my questions so warmly. I will return to this idea that being based outside France seems to have positively influenced the way I was welcomed.

Jean Lambert-wild et al.

In November 2010, and again a month later, in December 2010, I travelled to Caen, administrative centre of Basse-Normandie, to sit in rehearsals for the rerun of two shows by Jean Lambert-wild and his collaborators: *Le Recours aux forêts* (2009) and *La Mort d'Adam* (2010). Lambert-wild is artistic director of state-subsidised Comédie de Caen, one of France's Centres Dramatiques Nationaux, and his role within this structure consists of creating his own work as much as to promote, produce and programme other artists. The Comédie de Caen's programme, under Lambert-wild's direction, has focused on experimentation, intriguing collaborations and interdisciplinarity.⁸¹

The importance of interdisciplinarity in Lambert-wild's perspective is illustrated by the shared authorship of "his" shows: if he often is the impetus, he is by no means their sole author. The shows participate however in a singular individual project that is his. I acknowledge this characteristic by using Lambert-wild et al. throughout the thesis. Lambert-wild's idea that each person working within the Comédie de Caen collaborates towards a broader project means that I was welcomed as such: as a researcher, I was playing my part, documenting and critiquing Lambert-wild's project when he feels it is not granted enough critical attention.⁸² This implies that I was free to sit in as many rehearsals I would judge necessary to attend, and benefited from an inexhaustible source of information in numerous conversations with Lambert-wild himself. As I was, yet again, lodged

⁸¹ The design of the Comédie de Caen's yearly programmes, by renowned French illustrator Stéphane Blanquet, are an example of this focus on interdisciplinarity that Lambert-wild cherishes.

⁸² Lambert-wild is by no means absent from the French press and criticism, yet it is true that such documentation tends to focus on the intermedial and technological aspects of his theatre, with a few notable exceptions, including Pavis who dedicates a whole section of his *La Mise en scène contemporaine* and of his review of the 2010 Avignon festival, to two of Lambert-wild's work, namely *Mue* (2005) and *La Mort d'Adam*.

on the premises – within the main building of Comédie de Caen, in a flat usually used by artists in residence – and as the boundaries between the hours spent researching and the ones spent socialising started to blur, the methodology I had developed to approach Escale's *fieldwork* proved once again useful.

The situation was, however, not always this simple. Unlike the way Escale had related to me from the get-go, my relationships with Lambert-wild, during my November stay, were marked by opposition and a challenging behaviour on his behalf. The situation changed in December, presumably when Lambert-wild tacitly entrusted me with this position as researcher. As I had done when approaching Escale, I had introduced myself as both a PhD candidate and a practitioner; when Escale had seemed more interested in my work as a researcher than as a performer, Lambert-wild straightforwardly dismissed the latter in favour of my status as a researcher. In both cases too, the fact that I was based outside of France seem to have played in my favour, supposedly for the way it granted me a perspective that was as much an insider's as an outsider's one. My knowledge of Lambert-wild et al.'s work is also informed by the fact that my relationship with the Comédie de Caen has been ongoing, since December 2010. I have on occasion been hired by the theatre to write about Lambert-wild's work. This implies that I have now, at the time of writing, accumulated a wealth of material on his work that I could not have gathered on other case studies.

My interest in Lambert-wild et al.'s work stemmed from its peculiar position within the overall French theatre context. Blurring generic boundaries, using technology in the most refined ways and providing challenging yet accessible performances, this work is the best example of what Chamberlain means by "post-physical performance". However, for these reasons, it sits

uneasily in the overall French context: it is neither dance or mime, yet it is occasionally performed by dancers and mime artists; movement occupies a central position, yet, on occasions, performers are still and movement is re-located onto what surrounds them. Many of the performances cannot be interpreted as horizontal narratives; rather, it is necessary to surrender to an experience best enjoyed in-depth: *en profondeur*. Lambert-wild's position as director of a Centre Dramatique National also influenced my decision. It counter-balances the example of Escale, a company that is a lot less visible in the French theatre landscape, despite benefiting from public funding, with the example of an artist working within the institution. The decision to include Escale and Lambert-wild et al. as case studies in this thesis was also motivated by a desire to highlight practices that constitute the current theatre production in France but that might be less visible. If both Escale and Lambert-wild, albeit to different extent, are *outsiders* in the French theatrical landscape, they are presumably totally absent from most works and anthologies on French theatre in the UK. In this respect, to examine these artists' work is to participate in an ongoing project of mapping out all trends of French contemporary performance, including the small yet proactive communities of itinerant physical performance on the one hand, and intermedial and cross-disciplinary theatres on the other.

Told by an Idiot

If my research on Lambert-wild et al. had been partly informed by the one on Escale, Chapter 5, which focuses on the work on British company Told by an Idiot, disrupts the chronological order followed in Chapters 3 and 4. Having lived and worked in the UK for several years when I conducted this

fieldwork, I had seen some of the company's work prior to sitting in on some of their rehearsals. When, in November 2011, I travelled to Manchester to attend the devising sessions of the company's co-production with the Manchester Royal Exchange of the Broadway hit *You Can't Take It With You*, I witnessed the company's creative processes, albeit under the sole direction of co-artistic director Paul Hunter. In this respect, the fieldwork I undertook on *Told by an Idiot* was inherently different from the ones I had done with Escalé and Lambert-wild, where I had only attended rehearsals for reruns and not the creation of new work. In addition, when I had been granted by Escalé full access to their video archive, and had had an opportunity to similarly watch extracts from past pieces by Lambert-wild et al., I only had at my disposal, for *Told by an Idiot*, video footage of two past performances. This fact, and my own position as a practitioner within the UK context, informed my decision to concentrate in Chapter 5 on the production I had examined during the fieldwork. This necessarily restricts my study yet allows for an analysis that is deeply grounded in an embodied experience of the company's work and their process. More so than in the case of Escalé and Lambert-wild et al., this analysis also emerged from my own experience as a theatre-maker working in the same field as *Told by an Idiot*, therefore possessing a prior knowledge of "physical theatres"-making processes.

Told by an Idiot define their work as "theatre that is bigger than life" and that fuses together "collaborative writing, anarchic physicality and a playful but rigorous approach to text" (Website). Founded in 1993, the company has secured an enviable reputation in the UK and has collaborated with institutions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company. The decision to include *Told by an Idiot* as a

case study is manifold and circumstantial. The company's visibility and notoriety, their relationships with the institutions and their consistent production of work made them a relevant equivalent to the example of Lambert-wild. On the other hand, choosing a company working in "physical theatres" in a context saturated with examples suggests they might provide a rich terrain to explore the possibilities of a renewal of this category of work.

Whilst my relationships with both Escale and Lambert-wild had exceeded mere rehearsal attendance and operated around a friendly and trusting relationship, the way Told by an Idiot dealt with my presence was at once very casual yet very impersonal. I do not argue that theirs is a good or bad reaction, for every fieldwork is necessarily shaped by many different factors that certainly cannot all be attributed to the company. However, the fact that, in the UK, practitioners are likely to have been in contact with academic researchers, along with my own inclusion in a company that Told by an Idiot had heard of – making me in this regard a fellow practitioner - or the fact that the devising process had to happen quickly and with a group of actors that Hunter did not necessarily know, within the premises of the commissioning theatre, all undoubtedly informed the relationship. In this context, my status as a practitioner was what seemed to be remembered the most: it is in this respect that I was asked to "feed" an actor his lines, during a rehearsal, and it fuelled many discussions with the company around rehearsal hours. This is worth mentioning as it reflects the relationship between academic and practitioner spheres in both contexts. When the two companies based in France had seemed keen to gain exposure in an academic context, especially a *foreign* academic context, Told by an Idiot were at once extremely relaxed about me attending their rehearsals and very organised

and pragmatic about it. I had an allocated time of three days, and was treated as an invisible observer, albeit in a friendly way. This attitude, I argue, crystallises the differences between the way academia and practice are separated in France, and intrinsically connected in the UK, especially when focusing on devised and physical practices.

Little Bulb Theatre

The last case study of this thesis focuses on Little Bulb Theatre and constitutes the exception. I was not in this case the participant-observer of academic fieldwork, but a practitioner writing about my own work. The piece I examine here was not devised to conduct research; instead, it constitutes an artistic endeavour independent from this thesis, of which I was – and remain at the time of writing – a part of. There are thus essential methodological differences that need to be acknowledged. First, the *fieldwork* spanned over three years, during which the specific show I focus on as a case study, *Operation Greenfield*, was created, devised, performed and toured across the UK. In this respect, my analysis has been informed by an ongoing practice and a subjective experience of the object of study. Its inherently distinct nature, and the way it has informed so much of my research perspectives and knowledge of the theatre industry in the UK, crystallise the bi-focal perspective I use in this thesis: being a French practitioner making work and researching in the UK.

In the following chapter, the methodological tools developed and informed by these four case studies will be thoroughly examined. Combining a phenomenological approach with an ethnographic perspective, this methodology provides embodied tools to explore the way movement and physicality can be

used in “physical theatres” to question notions of intimacy, challenge spatial boundaries, and coin alternative modes of making and experiencing theatre.

CHAPTER 2: WRITING FROM A PLACE OF EXPERIENCE

The work of Escale, Jean Lambert-wild et al., Told by an Idiot and Little Bulb Theatre illustrates the diversity of techniques and aesthetics that I include under the umbrella term “physical theatres”. The way each one of these companies creates work, and the formal and artistic qualities of their productions, informed the critical perspectives that subtend this thesis and contributed to shaping a methodology that suited their analysis. Since this thesis consists of a comparison between work originating from two different national contexts, a methodology that draws on the critical traditions of both contexts is adequate. Therefore, combining both a French and a British critical approach, the line of inquiry is simultaneously “microtextual” and “macrotextual”, in Finburgh and Lavery’s words (5). There are two reasons for this twofold approach: first, it does the case studies justice, allowing them to be analysed through a lens that is simultaneously familiar and alien to the context they are extracted from. I shall return to this idea that I term a process of *alienation*. A “macrotextual” perspective draws parallels between the work and the contexts in which they are produced. On the other hand, a certain trend of French criticism that emphasises a poetic analysis of the works enables me to write about the experience here at stake in a way that encompasses an embodied and *felt* dimension of movement. The methodology I use also draws on bilingualism, motivated by an acknowledgement that language partly influences the different attitudes towards

“physical theatres” in each context and informs academic discourses on performance on either side of the Channel.

Bilingualism as methodology

The decision to combine two culturally informed approaches goes hand in hand with the question of language, a dimension that was present from the inception of this study until the moment of its redaction. As was made evident in the Introduction, the terminological gap that exists between the French and the English language to speak about theatre and especially “physical theatres” has shaped the way I approached and analysed the work. It also allowed me to reflect on the particular relationship I had with the work and to situate myself with/in it. One’s position in and in-between two cultures that, however geographically close, operate according to distinct codes, opens up the question of translation. Apart from the works for which an English version was available, every translation in the thesis is mine. This is not without problem, as such an exercise is inherently biased. Roger Baines, Cristina Marinetti and Manuela Perteghella evoke how “the very practice underpinning translation for the stage [is] complex, multifaceted, diverse, cultural and often personal” (2), in their Introduction to *Staging and Performing Translation*. The translations I insert here are not “for the stage”, and do not all consist of artistic material. However, the “practice underpinning” this exercise is very similar to the one described by Baines et al.: it encompasses a “personal” dimension that is inseparable from my perspective as *alienated*, where the familiar is made alien, and the foreign is brought up close.

Reflecting this dimension, I have included quotations in French directly in the body of the thesis, providing a translation in English in the footnotes. There are also instances where French expressions are used as critical devices in their own right. I moved from seeing the fact that there exists no appropriate French translation for the English expressions “physical theatre” or “devised theatre” as a terminological foible of the other language, to it becoming an influential factor of this research project. Thus, similarly, when terminology in English seemed to encapsulate less than its translation in French, I have left the French expression in the text but explained its terminological connections, reciprocating the decision to look at “physical theatres” in a context where words to talk about them are absent.

I have already noted how the differences between the French and the English language accounted for philosophical differences, illustrating this argument with D’Amelio and Pavis’ analyses. I examine now the methodological and critical implications for the researcher who is writing in a language other than her own. Recent work in theatre studies has focused on the question of translation,⁸³ but the question of the language of academic research, especially with regards to the language one researches and writes with, seems to remain relatively unexplored. The discipline of social geography on the other hand has extensively examined the question and addressed both the conducting of research in a foreign language, and the question of writing research outcomes in a second language, with an emphasis on the cultural implications of using English as a lingua franca.⁸⁴ In an article titled “More Than Just Translation: Challenges and

⁸³ See for example Baines et al.’s *Staging and Performing Translation*.

⁸⁴ On this matter, see for instance: Aalbers, M. B., “Creative Destruction Through the Anglo-American Hegemony: A Non-Anglo-American View on Publications, Referees and Language”; Rodríguez-Pose, A., “Commentary: Is There An “Anglo-American” Domination in Human

Opportunities in Translingual Research”, Lucy Crane, Melanie Lombard and Eric Tenz reflect on the linguistic implications of their research in the field of social geography. Crane, Lombard and Tenz’s article is divided into five sections: an introduction and a conclusion that Crane et al. author collectively, and three sections corresponding to each author’s specific research project.⁸⁵ In the penultimate section of the article, the author examines how a bilingual perspective was valuable for her/his research project, dealing with urban policy making in East Germany – the author’s country of origin – but published in an English-speaking academic community. This endeavour proved more complex than first expected, and the author “realised the translation of academic concepts originating from different language contexts and the negotiation of the (partly) different meanings in the research process” represented a difficult balance. The author argues that “the act of translation” can “create ... hybrid spaces of understanding” (44). I further this argument suggesting that this is valid not only for “the act of translation”, but also on an “infra-translational” level. This “infra-translational” level is essentially what the author calls “the negotiation of the (partly) different meanings” (44) inherent to the act of translation. It is reflected here by these occasional inclusions of a French term rather than its English equivalent, accompanied by a glossing over of the expression’s potential translations and a discussion of the expression’s potential implicit meaning. Such methodology means the word eventually encapsulates a meaning that is bilingually informed: reflexive and densely layered with meanings that might have been absent from the original and/or the translated version.

Geography? And, Is It Bad?”.

⁸⁵ It is not however specified which author conducted which research.

This decision reflects and is motivated by the realisation on my part that, as expressed in Crane et al.'s article, "moving between [French-]⁸⁶ and English-language material demanded a critical and intensive engagement with concepts relevant for my research, including those I already felt familiar with" (43). If this necessarily implies a greater reflexivity in my position as a bilingual researcher, it also suggests that it was necessary to "unpack the various political, social, and cultural dimensions behind these concepts and to explore a range of different interpretations" (43). This process means that a bilingual methodology questions and challenges apparently *evident* concepts, highlighting how much context – in which the words are used, where they were coined, to what they apply – had an influence on creating academic discourse. It is a similar methodology that I have used to examine this thesis' case studies. Whilst looking at work produced in the UK through a French-inspired lens allows potentially unexpected perspectives to appear, the reverse is also true. Positioning myself as a bilingual researcher, I examine work made in France through a British-oriented perspective, allowing specifically French characteristics to appear that I might not have been aware of. When Finburgh and Lavery identify elements in the work of contemporary French playwrights that French scholars seem reluctant to acknowledge ("Introduction" 5), this is not because of an essential disagreement of French critics about the political reading suggested by Finburgh and Lavery. Rather, it originates from an inherently different critical perspective on the work. Finburgh and Lavery analyse for example that the "detailed readings of the spatial experiments made by French playwrights ... could possibly be seen in a broader social context, as an expression of, and a response to, a particularly French sense

⁸⁶ Crane et al.'s article mentions "German-".

of malaise” (6). Instead, some of the French scholars published in the volume analyse these “spatial experiments” through a “meticulously close stylistic and semiotic analysis” that the authors analyse as “dominat[ing] French criticism” (6). In their analysis, informed by a British perspective, Finburgh and Lavery’s reflect on how this “malaise” is inherently French because it is bound to France’s troubled history with the Algerian war and its consequences (7). The authors’ *foreign* perspective on France’s troubled past, on current artists’ reflections on such a past and on critical perspectives adopted to analyse it, is what allowed an alternative perspective.

Reflecting on my position as a researcher

The question of my position between two languages and two cultures, and the act of working in / with a language other than my mother tongue have had consequences for the way I positioned myself as a researcher. The specificity of working in a multi-lingual research environment is registered by Crane et al. in another section of their article, where the author writes that “carrying out research in a bilingual setting gave rise to increased reflexivity”, noting in particular that she “found (her)self reflecting on (her) positionality, and related to this, issues of identity and representation, based on the “translation” of (her) identity as a researcher into different research settings” (42).⁸⁷

The self-reflexive stance that being positioned between two languages induces was matched by the fact that research was conducted in a language other than one’s mother tongue. In my case, this *foreign* stance was the one I used to

⁸⁷ The gender of the author of this specific section is specified in the description she gives of how context affected the way she, as an English young woman, was treated.

examine examples taken from the country I was originally from, therefore the examples I should initially have been the most familiar with. This movement is twofold. On the one hand, researching the British context as a French native meant adapting to slightly different cultural codes and a different theatre and academic environment, whilst being aware that I would appear as a foreigner by default. On the other hand, and perhaps more surprisingly, I was able to experience a similar, if reversed, reaction when meeting artists or researchers in France. In the latter case, I had become *sort of* a foreigner, because of my relocation abroad. The fact that a lot of the research outcomes that would emanate from this initial “fieldwork” were to be redacted in English constitute an additional reason for *alienation*.

As noted in the Introduction, the research I conducted with Escale influenced the methodology I use throughout the thesis. The particularities of the company’s lifestyle contributed to the transformation of the research into a “fieldwork” of the kind developed in ethnography. This and the linguistic *alienation* I have mentioned, meant a self-reflexive perspective was compulsory. I draw on Sarah Gorman who, in a paper entitled “The New York City Players and the Ethics of Witnessing/Writing the Performance”, focuses on her attendance of The New York City Players’ rehearsals for *The End of Reality*, in 2006, and develops a methodology that applies an ethnographic model to rehearsal observation.⁸⁸ Gorman writes about how her presence in the room

⁸⁸ It is a similar endeavour that Gay McAuley develops in *Not Magic But Work: An Ethnographic Account of a Rehearsal Process* (2012), although McAuley is primarily interested in the dynamics inherent to the rehearsal more than in the artistic process, establishing parallels between relationships within the rehearsal room and wider socio-cultural patterns. In this respect, McAuley’s endeavour is embedded in an ethnographic tradition when Gorman’s – and my own – are more concerned with drawing on ethnography to coin a methodology specific to the research undertaken.

appeared to impact the whole rehearsal dynamics, a dimension she found under-theorised in publications about rehearsal processes. She thus explains that: “[a]s a result, I broadened out my conception of rehearsal-attendance into “fieldwork” and looked to the field of cultural anthropology, and more specifically, ethnography” (2). Acknowledging that “it is questionable as to whether it is possible to think of theatre-fieldwork such as rehearsal observation as a form of “ethnography””, for the way “rehearsal observation is customarily looking to learn about specific disciplinary practices (directing, rehearsal processes, performing, shaping a performance) rather than to learn about the community of people participating” (2), Gorman nonetheless posits that “[d]espite epistemic differences ... interventions into ethnographic research methodology appear useful in helping us think about how to develop a critical and self-reflexive methodology” (2). Gorman is primarily interested in proposing tools to acknowledge the influence her presence as an observer had on the rehearsal process, thus positioning herself as a “participant-observer”. Unlike Gorman, I do not reflect on the impact my presence during rehearsals might have had on the process – it never seemed to be disruptive, yet I have little possibility of knowing otherwise. The value of Gorman’s methodology lies in the way it “offer[s] an alternative methodological model ... which avoids the relativistic retreat that is often figured by a foregrounding of the subjective “I”” (4), whilst simultaneously allowing the “I” to be acknowledged.

Applying dance ethnography to a study of theatre

To acknowledge this “subjective “I””, I have grounded my research in a methodology that encompasses a phenomenological perspective whilst drawing on dance ethnography. Being a spectator of most of the works studied in this thesis, I experienced the pieces on a somatic and emotional level as much as on an intellectual plane, actively engaging with the works and with my status as an audience member. In *Feeling Theatre*, Martin Welton suggests that “[t]o the extent that any of the book is ... “practice based”, it is in this: that we experience the theatre – even installed in seats as looking spectators or as a listening audience – as a dynamic process” (10). In Welton’s perspective, this “dynamic process” is simultaneously “an engagement of self, and one’s own possibilities, as much as of the objects towards which one’s attention is directed” (2). This “practice of spectating” is complemented by the fact that, being myself a performer, I often had a prior *embodied* knowledge of what I was witnessing as an audience member: I know how performing *feels like*. In this respect and similarly to Welton’s analysis, this thesis is “practice-based” in the way it encompasses my practice as a spectator, as a performer and as a researcher.

When Gorman’s use of an ethnographic framework to analyse rehearsal attendance proved useful to acknowledge my position and bias within the fieldworks, dance ethnography has provided methodological tools to both reflect on this status as “participant-observer” and analyse how movement in performance relates to wider socio-cultural patterns. I am indebted to a long-standing scholarship in the field, namely Jane Cowan on the social and political implications of a traditional dance in Northern Greece (*Dance and the Body Politic*), Sally Ann Ness on the embodiment of Filipino culture through dance

(*Body, Movement and Culture*), and closer to my research interests, Cynthia Novack on contact improvisation in the USA (*Sharing the Dance*). Novack for instance examines contact improvisation through the lens of ethnography despite being familiar with the culture and the context that produced the dance,⁸⁹ when both Cowan and Ness were alien to the contexts they were studying. On the other hand, Cowan and Ness were both examining forms of dance that they could join, even as foreigners, whilst there was no question for me to join in the work of the companies I have researched. Moreover, the perspective examined by these three writers focus on social forms of dance, when my study concentrates on work that is made to be performed within a specific artistic context.

Dance ethnography proves however useful for my purpose as it takes into account what Novack calls elsewhere “the conjunction between the sensible and the intelligible” (Bull 270),⁹⁰ two “different but profoundly interrelated levels of analysis, description, and understanding”. Novack argues this approach is both “extrinsic” and “intrinsic”, the former focusing on “culture and history present in, and that inform the art work”, and the latter on “the sensual qualities of experience” (“Sense, Meaning and Perception” 270). To analyse movement, Novack suggests taking into account “the interplay” between “the technical and conceptual developments and experiments with the dance form itself”, “the lives and perspectives of the ... participants”, “the responses of the viewers” and finally “the means through which dance is organized and produced” (*Sharing the Dance* 15). Dance ethnography supposes taking into account, when analysing

⁸⁹ The idea that one can analyse one’s culture as simply another form of “ethnic culture”, in Helen Thomas’ words (*The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* 80), owes to Joann Kealiinohomoku who, in 1970, argued for a consideration of ballet as a form of “ethnic culture” in the same way “Other” cultures’ dances could be analysed, specifying that “[b]y ethnic dance, anthropologists mean ... that all forms of dance reflect the cultural traditions within which they developed” (“An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet” 33).

⁹⁰ Novack also published under the name Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull.

movement, both the specificities of the individual physicality that produces it, and the socio-cultural context it is a product and a reflect of. Examining how movement, in artistic practice, is informed by and reflects upon the socio-cultural context it is generated in means it is possible to map out instances where movement proposes an alternative or a subversive dimension.

If drawing on dance ethnography allows self-reflexivity whilst encompassing the “intrinsic” dimension of the knowledge acquired during “fieldwork”, my approach differs on several points: first, the somatic knowledge I refer to is, for all case studies but the last one, an acknowledgement of my position as an audience member. On no occasion have I taken part in the artistic process of the companies I have observed, other than my own. However, there is no doubt that an understanding and experience of these rehearsal processes and live performances were informed by my own status as a practitioner, in the way I experienced the work but also in the way the artists related to me. The idea developed by Jane Cowan that dance must be approached “not only as a “spectacle” ... but also as a process of intersubjectivity”, and that it must therefore “be considered from the actor’s point of view, as both performance and experience” (24), is here applied and complicated by the fact that, even in the case studies where I was not an “actor” of the performance, I was actively participating in its reception. Secondly, when the dance ethnographies mentioned here focus on the “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” qualities of danced movement, my approach focuses on an extended definition of movement that encompasses, for example, voice and stillness. I thus extend a methodology inspired by dance ethnography to the study of movement in theatre performance. Thirdly, if I am conscious of the cultural dimension of the movement vocabularies chosen in the

case studies, I am not solely concerned with deciphering how they operate as cultural signifiers. Drawing on dance ethnography allows me to identify the research, and particularly rehearsal attendance and interviews, as “fieldwork”, and it highlights instances where movement is subversive depending on the context it is generated in.

Experiencing theatre: phenomenology and kinaesthetic empathy

To reflexively include myself in the case studies and acknowledge the way I perceived the “intrinsic” qualities of the work, I draw on a phenomenological perspective. The postulate enunciated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which has subsequently been used in many studies of performance,⁹¹ that one does not *have* a body, but *is* one, allows “the conjunction between the sensible and the intelligible” Novack was calling for (Bull 270). Drawing on a phenomenological perspective is also coherent with this thesis’ aim to explore intimacy in movement, as it allows for a knowledge that is embodied. Carrie Noland, referring to Merleau-Ponty’s “The Philosopher and Sociology”, highlights indeed how the philosopher “claims that attention to one’s bodily techniques and the sensations they engender can be the basis of a[n] ... ethnographic method, one that posits sensory self-reflexivity as the conduit to greater understanding *of the other*” (440).

Dismissing the Cartesian divide between body and mind, Merleau-Ponty’s perspective emphasises that the perceiving body is at the same time “objective body” and “phenomenal body” (*Phenomenology* 123): body perceiving for me, and body perceived by others. Merleau-Ponty suggests that

⁹¹ See for instance Stanton B. Garner’s *Bodied Spaces* (1994).

[i]t is indeed not enough to say that the objective body belongs to the realm of “for others”, and my phenomenal body to that of “for me”, and we cannot refuse to pose the problem of their relations, since the “for me” and the “for others” co-exist in one world, as is proved by my perception of an other who immediately brings me back to my condition of an object for him. (120)

This distinction between the two is further blurred by the fact that, in a Merleau-Pontian perspective, “[t]he world seen is not “in” my body, and my body is not “in” the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it ... My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle” (*Visible* 181). This perspective echoes Mark Paterson’s proposition that “in terms of sensation, there is no simple inside and outside” since “[t]he distribution of nerves throughout the body elides any neat distinction between interoception and exteroception” (“Haptic Geographies” 780) and that the “perceptual “self” / “other” boundaries between “my” body and others” owes to an imbalanced reliance on vision at the expense of the other senses. This perspective allows me to acknowledge my experience of performance on a level than is not solely visual or aural but that encompasses the other senses, taking the self as a sentient whole. It also positions me as a participant in a group of other audience members – or other performers, as in the last case study – who experience performance individually but also collectively, due to our presence in the same room, at the same time. Drawing on a phenomenological perspective to coin a methodological framework allows the experience of the “lived body” to be taken into account.

As with dance ethnography, registering the experience of the “lived body” offers perspectives into how movement can be used in “physical theatres” in a way that is alternative or subversive. Rachel Fensham for example, in *To Watch Theatre*, calls for a practice of “watching”, which she identifies as “different from reading, from looking, and from other forms of critical interpretation” (11). Similarly to dance ethnographers, Fensham argues that cultural patterns can be identified in movement vocabularies: she insists that

Theatre, at its finest, can show us how to observe social relations, or how to witness conflicts between individuals, or how to comment on power games and symbolic structures. But, on another level entirely, there is a silent paying of attention to the interactions between the phenomenology of the person, a somebody, and another. (11)

Fensham is in favour of an approach to spectating that encompasses all the senses. Doing so, she calls for a taking into consideration of “the importance of affect to the performance spectator”, emphasising that “whether called pleasure, boredom, excitement or regret, it is this feeling of watching that activates other relationships and critical perspectives that may have longer term social and political purposes” (14).

Fensham’s argument is echoed by Peta Tait’s work on aerial physicality. In *Circus Bodies*, Tait examines how the aerial artist, and especially the female aerialist, can use movement to disrupt social expectations. In the last chapter of her book, Tait analyses these effects of disruption through a phenomenological

framework, when aerial acts and the fantasies they suggest are experienced viscerally. Tait argues that “a spectator will “catch” the aerial body with his or her senses in mimicry of flying with a mesh of reversible-body-to-body (or – bodies) phenomenology”, and that “[i]n this visual catching, motion and emotion converge” (141). Tait adds that “[t]he seeing of aerialists seems to induce visceral reactions like those produced with tactile stimuli” (141). This last idea is particularly relevant for my project in the way it problematises movement as *touch*. Tait is concerned with exploring the links between the viscosity experienced when witnessing aerial acts and the fact that it induces for a spectator to “viscerally perceive[] the physicality of another body (or other bodies) in a process of oscillating identification and disidentification with its cultural identity” (141). It is this process of oscillation that allows movement to be potentially subversive, as it resonates with, or is perceived as utterly alien to, one’s cultural identity.

The cultural identity of spectators is what Tait calls “intertextuality”:⁹² “bodily sensations linked to prior experiences combining physiological and psychological activity” (142). Such visceral intertextuality “might manifest itself as awareness of a bodily sensation, which can be generalized as holding the breath or be localized in the stomach or the throat” (149). Tait analyses this as how “motion seen live might be absorbed into interior awareness, and continue to be dynamic even when it is not externally reproduced”. This perspective echoes Paterson’s idea of a “haptic knowledge” that, by being grounded in somatic responses, blurs the distinction between “self” and “other” (“Haptic Geographies” 781). Tait adds that “[t]he retention of movement in the

⁹² Despite borrowing the term from literary studies, Tait distances herself from a literary or textual interpretation of movement in performance.

imagination implicates circulating interconnections in kinaesthetic knowledge, dependent on other bodies and experience that need to be seen (or felt) in the first instance” (149). It is in this respect that aerial movement has the potential to be subversive: in Tait’s words, “[t]o effect a change in patterns of social relationships between bodies might require unfolding bodily disruptions of kinetic cultural orientations”. This way, “[a] visceral encounter with an ambiguous body identity bends pre-existing patterns of body-to-body (or – bodies) phenomenological exchanges and is at least potentially disruptive of hierarchical patternings” (150). I draw on Tait’s perspective to examine the potential subversive dimension of movement in physical theatres, albeit occasionally bending her argumentation, especially in Chapter 6.

It is a similar suggestion that Carrie Noland makes, in *Agency and Embodiment*, when she argues that “gesture” – “the organized forms of kinesis through which subjects navigate and alter their worlds” (4) – has the ability to “also be an experience of itself”: “of particular ways of *moving*” (211). What interests me here is the way such an awareness allows one to register the “presence of not only sensation but also cultural conditioning” (212) when performing gestures. This in turn means that one can be aware of the gap between “what gestures *mean* ... and what gestures make us *feel*”, which is where Noland locate a potential for critique and, ultimately, subversion, when the subject decides to alter the ways s/he moves. Noland’s perspective is inseparable from an idea of kinesis, which in turn echoes Tait’s idea that movement can bend cultural expectations on a phenomenological level. What Noland’s perspectives bring to a study of movement in performance is the idea

that such decisions to move away from cultural conditioning can be achieved in a way that is orchestrated and somatically hyper-aware.

These perspectives, and Tait's in particular, with the idea of an "intertextual" reception of movement in performance, can be effective at a level of kinaesthetic empathy. Martin Welton notes how "[i]n theatre and performance criticism, and in particular in relation to dance, the term "kinaesthesia" is often used to describe both a sensing of one's own and others' movements", a process that infers that "the movement of gesture impacts directly (so it is claimed), in the physiology of another" (87). Drawing on the work of Hanna Järvinen, Welton sees this perspective as flawed since performers often have difficulty recalling "what their body is doing at a given moment" (87). This implies that advocating for a communication of the somatic meaning of movement from performers to audience members through kinaesthetic empathy is inherently inconsistent. In a similar vein, Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason in an article titled "Kinesthesia, Empathy and Related Pleasures", focus on the way audience members experience dance. Reason and Reynolds' endeavour is "firmly located within the ethnographic traditions of audience research" (50), and therefore avoids "the potential universalism present in conceptualizations of kinesthetic empathy" (50) that Welton rejects. Their approach presupposes that movement conveys meaning because audiences react and respond to it depending on their own experiences of movement.

Reason and Reynolds define "kinesthesia" as "sensations of movement", both from inner and outer stimuli – proprioception, and exteroception. The authors also specify that "kinesthesia can be considered as integral to perception" (53), a feature that, once again, displaces the focus, in studies about audience's

perception, from the visual realm to a fully embodied experience. The article suggests “empathy” is frequently understood as “embodied simulation or substitution and sympathy as a response involving feelings” (53). Thus the concept of “kinesthetic empathy” supposes that audience members experience movement on stage in a way that is physical as much as it is psychological. They identify and connect with the movement they see, or they feel estranged from it, depending on their cultural heritage, their experience of the specific dance they are witnessing and of dance in general (55). In well-documented case studies, the authors illustrate how spectators, who are themselves trained in one or more dance vocabularies react in completely different ways from “novice” audience members, whose experience of dance has always been from a spectator’s point of view and never from a practitioner’s. They therefore underline how much one’s cultural background, and a physical, embodied knowledge of specific movement vocabularies, importantly affect the way one experiences dance as a spectacle. In this respect, Reason and Reynold’s perspectives join Tait’s idea that “[e]ach spectator brings his or her accumulated personal and social histories of body movement and motion to live and cinematic action, and these become absorbed into further live experiences of motion” (144).

These perspectives allow a reconsideration of spectatorship as active sensorial participation, and acknowledge how sensorial experiences of performance are part of a knowledge-building process. They also reassess relationships between performers and spectators in a subtle shifting of boundaries between *their* movement and *my* movement and the way both are viscerally experienced, a perspective that recalibrates notions of gesture and of touch. This shift illustrates methodologically what the argument of this thesis

does theoretically: examining how movement in physical theatres can blur boundaries between *me* and *them*, the individual and the collective, self and other, and redefine intimacy as encompassing the collective. It is there that the subversive potential of these “physical theatres” lay: in the way they suggest, on a somatic, *felt* level, an alternative to otherwise dominant forms of association.

Writing as a “physical theatres” practitioner

Whilst my position as a researcher who is also a practitioner is acknowledged throughout the thesis, the last case study, in Chapter 6, shifts in tone as I give an account of my own practice. If the *archive* used in all case studies encompasses a somatic dimension, the last case study in particular is informed by such an embodied and subjective account. I drew inspiration for the writing of Chapter 6 from similar endeavours where practitioners and academics’ voices are interwoven. Bobby Baker and Michèle Barrett’s *Bobby Baker: Redeeming Features of Daily Life*, Rosemary Butcher and Susan Melrose’s *Choreography, Collisions and Collaborations*, or Carl Lavery and David Williams “*Good Luck Everybody*”: *Lone Twin – Journeys, Conversations and Performances* are a few examples of this. The writing that results from the embodied account of devising, rehearsing and performing *Operation Greenfield*, the way it was experienced from the inside,⁹³ are informed by Rebecca Schneider’s reconsideration of the “archive”. In “Archives, Performance Remains”, Schneider disputes the term, arguing that “the archive is habitual to

⁹³ Using the term “inside” reflects the biased nature of my account, and positions me as an “insider”, familiar with the way we as Little Bulb Theatre operate to make work and in daily life.

Western culture” and that “we understand ourselves relative to the remains we accumulate, ... the material traces we acknowledge” (100). Schneider regards such “logic of the archive” as inherently phallogentric, for its inscription in a “patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white-cultural)” context that privileges the ocular over any other form of perception. Schneider then acknowledges how performance “remains” in a way that challenges the “logic of the archive”. She rejects the claim, laid out by Peggy Phelan among others, that “one of the deepest challenges about writing about performance is that the object of one’s meditations, the performance itself, disappears” (*Mourning Sex* 11). Schneider argues that this perspective is informed by a political premise: “[i]f performance can be understood as disappearing, perhaps performance can rupture the ocular hegemony” (101). However, Schneider replies that such strategy can instead lead one to “ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently” (101). This, she argues, suggests that “an equation of performance with impermanence and loss follow[s] rather than disrupt[s] a cultural habituation to the imperialism inherent in archival logic” (101). Schneider argues that a perception of performance as what disappears means that “flesh is given to be that which slips away” (102). She thus calls for performance to be considered “not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the *act* of remaining and a means of reappearance” (103). This allows for the emergence, and the taking into consideration, of another kind of archive: a history that reappears “onto body-to-body transmission” (104). It is this “body-to-body transmission” that I am interested in, as it applies on a methodological level the theoretical reconsideration of boundaries between “inside(s)” and “outside(s)”.

If Schneider's rejection of Phelan's perspective about the ephemerality of performance informs my understanding of performance as what "remains", Phelan's call for a writing that encapsulates the subjective dimension of an experience of live performance proved an important inspiration for this thesis (*Mourning Sex* 12; "Trisha Brown's *Orfeo*" 15), even if I do not engage with performative writing as such. The archive of past performances of *Operation Greenfield* that remains, the material "bones" that were left behind (notebooks, drawings, track lists, a script of the text, video recordings...) illustrate Schneider's argument. The video recording for instance constitutes a fossilised memory of one specific performance. It might enlighten one on the structure of the show, or the quality of the performance on that specific night, but it remains inherently unfaithful to the embodied "remains" I use to write about *Operation Greenfield*: a stratification, a weaving together of past performances and of performances to come, of rehearsing and devising processes, of many moods, accidents, physical sensations, of weather, locations, audiences... In this effort, I hope to make this specific writing about an event that has become crystallised as one super-performance of *Operation Greenfield*, faithful to the unfaithfulness of remembering.⁹⁴

This thesis constitutes one of the ways the performance remains, and I suggest that this text be read as a "site of performance", which Schneider argues means that:

⁹⁴ I am here clearly indebted to Peggy Phelan's point that "memories of ... bodies have a kind of porousness around them, often making it difficult to distinguish between then and now" ("Trisha Brown's *Orfeo*" 14). Memories of my colleagues' movement and of my own are entangled with, in Phelan's words, "memories in relation to my own body's movements, and the movements of other bodies I have looked at closely" (14).

performance does not disappear, but remains as ritual act – ritual acts which ... *script* disappearance. We are reading, then, our performative relations to documents and to documents' ritual status as performatives within a culture that privileges object remains. We are reading, then, the document as performative act, and as site of performance (105).

In this regard, the way I analyse the gentle subversive-ness at work in *Operation Greenfield* constitutes an attempt of what David Williams defines as: “to “do” or perform something of the moment(um) or affect of movement in absent bodies, or at least to rehearse aspects of the ambiguities, pluralities, displacements and ephemerality of live performance through the conjunction of diverse modes of writing and voices” (“Writing (After) The Event” 106). This endeavour, Williams suggests, acknowledges that “disappearance is the function of appearance, [and] subtends appearance in the way that forgetting creates the ground for remembering’s possibility: an imbricated loop of concentration and evaporation, emergence and dissolution, form and *informe*” (105). Williams suggests that this “might be read as the preparation of conditions for critically resistant thought” (106). Acknowledging, in the writing, these “loops” of appearance and disappearance inherent to past performance, and the embodied dimension of any recollection I have of these performances, I hope to contribute to the effect of gentle reversal of codes of representation that Little Bulb Theatre’s work proposes.

Writing the “feeling body” (Paterson 784)

Whilst it is in the last case study that it is the most tangible, there is a consistent endeavour underpinning the writing used throughout the thesis. I have mentioned earlier that the methodology I use is informed by a bilingual and bi-cultural perspective. This means that I use at times a French-oriented perspective that allows what Finburgh and Lavery have called a “meticulously close stylistic and semiotic analysis” (6). This myopic thoroughness means the critical text that emerges is coloured with verbal images, a quality that I argue generates alternative levels of criticism. I acknowledge the influence of a type of critical writing, of which Roland Barthes is one example, that combines rigour with the sensoriality and sensuality of language.⁹⁵ This accounts for the translation into writing of the way performance *feels*, a concern that has permeated dance ethnography since its early stages and that I apply here to the question of movement in a wider performance context. Similarly, Paterson calls for ways of writing ethnographic accounts that reflect the sensuous dimensions of the fieldwork. Acknowledging the “recursive difficulties of transcribing one set of sensations into another language”, Paterson advocates a form of writing “where a poetic sensibility meets a sensuous disposition” (785). Paterson proposes in this respect to use “the styles and methods involved in experimental or creative writing” (785), suggesting “[r]hythm, the folding of sensations, creativity in expression, and the use of sensory similes and metaphors” (784). Paterson’s remarks highlight how movement resonates intimately within one’s corporeality; they also underline the difficulty to transpose into words movement that is felt internally. Using bilingualism as a methodology partakes in this endeavour: it

⁹⁵ In texts such as *S/Z* (1975) or *Image, Music, Text* (1977), among others.

provides a tool for the translation of movement into words from a perspective that is both familiar and alien whilst taking into account the intimate and subjective dimension of this account. The two languages I have used throughout this research project have deeper, intimate connotations for me, in a way that is inherently personal, yet that inevitably colours this text. In this respect, the writing blurs the boundary between “inside” and “outside” that Paterson argues must be taken into account in the ethnographic fieldwork. It is also grounded in an understanding of intimacy as influencing the reception and creation of performance and of discourses on performance. This resonates with this thesis’ aim to explore the ways performance is *experienced* rather than *watched*, and to find ways of writing about such a *felt* dimension.

The Spaces of the theatre

This thesis examines how movement in “physical theatres” challenges spaces. The spaces I explore are the ones that inhabit theatres, more than the ones theatre inhabits. They are metaphorical, fictional, and scenographic spaces; I am also especially interested in the space(s) *between* audiences and performers. In this respect, I draw on the definition of intimacy I laid out in the Introduction, exploring what Alan Read terms the “relations of proximity” (1). These spaces are on occasion intimate, and on occasion the way the companies use movement make them into intimate spaces. Gay McAuley’s landmark study *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* provides a useful taxonomy that is used extensively in this thesis for the way it allows a subtle analysis of the interplay of all theatre spaces and the way they generate meaning. Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*, which proposes a phenomenological insight into

the poetic imagination of familiar spaces, proves a rich resource too, allowing a poetic yet rigorous exploration. Bachelard's analysis suggests, as put by Read, that while "metaphor gives concrete substance to an impression that is difficult to express, image on the other hand ... owes its entire being to imagination and, unlike metaphor, has phenomenological value, it is a phenomenon of being and is specific to the speaking creature" (153). Bachelard's perspective echoes this thesis' effort to find means of translation to write about movement, intimacy and space in performance; it also references the phenomenological dimension of such a language, connecting it to the movement it is used to describe.

I postulate in this thesis that movement can destabilise distinctions between openness and closure, and enable an embodied experience of intimacy – and occasionally, an intimate experience – that is at times collective. The methodology developed here mirrors this dimension and challenges these binaries in its own right. The parallel questions of, on the one hand, what Schneider has termed "body-to-body transmission" of the ways performance "remains", and on the other hand, of an analysis of movement that draws on phenomenology and kinaesthetic empathy, mirror on a methodological level the idea that movement disrupts distinctions between in- and outside, individual and collective dimensions, and redefines notions of gesture and touch. The thesis also advocates for bilingualism to be used as methodology. I do not suggest that to approach the material one has to be fluent in both French and English. Rather, what this position between languages allows is a process of *alienation*: making the familiar less familiar and the foreign less distant, providing in this way terms of transcription that account for the *felt* dimension of movement. I examine the four case studies through concepts expressed in another language but rich in the

process of “infra-translation” they have been subjected to. This also resonates on a methodological level with the hypothesis that movement provokes alternative ways of making, but also of understanding, theatre. In this respect, the thesis’ methodology reflects instances where movement is used in performance to generate alternative and potentially subversive ways of making theatre, as it sets in motion ways of writing about theatre.

CHAPTER 3:

THEATRE IN MOVEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE FRENCH TRAVELLING COMPANY ESCALE.

Many small-scale companies, in France and in the UK, tour their shows and travel from venue to venue, across countries and occasionally continents, by their own means of transport, a whole set crammed into the back of a van. The company Escale, based in France, have taken this idea further: twenty-five years ago, they made a conscious decision to be not only a touring, but a travelling theatre company. The distinction lies in the fact that, for a long time, Escale's home was on the roads; their "base", a series of caravans and trucks that, unwinding like a long steel ribbon along sinuous country roads in rural France, would slowly make their way from settlement to settlement. The name of the company reflects and echoes this particular lifestyle: in French, "faire escale" means "to call at", "to make a stopover". The constant movement of the travelling life is embedded in the company's name, and in the idea that subtended their work for several years that, if they decide to stop, it was not to settle but to bring something new, for a few days, to a place that they would physically invest.

Escale's work belongs to the category of "physical theatres" I identified in the Introduction to this thesis. It is somewhat exceptional in the French context and is characterised by pluri-disciplinarity. Fusing dance, aerialism, circus and mime, it merges an athletic physicality with Decroux-inspired "mime corporel". Hugues Hollenstein, a mime artist born in France but of Swiss origin, and Grit

Krausse, an aerialist born in Cuba of German parents, founded the company in 1991. In those early days, the company lived in Brittany and toured across France and Germany, with work such as the company's first creation: *Aucun poisson ne rit des souvenirs* (1992). The piece, inspired by Rodin's sculptures, bears the hallmarks of Hollenstein's training with Étienne Decroux. On a journey back from Berlin, they fell victim to a dramatic car accident that left them only slightly injured but deprived of all material possessions. Following this misfortune, Krausse and Hollenstein found a shelter with new circus company Les Oiseaux Fous. This was to be Escale's first encounter with marquees. After a few collaborations with Les Oiseaux Fous, Escale purchased their first marquee, which they used to perform their work whilst touring as part of the Les Oiseaux Fous collective. Escale's productions during this period, *R de Rien* (1995) and *Le Pêcheur et sa femme* (1997), are characterised by versatile sets and costumes, a detailed and subtle physicality and few spoken words. Escale eventually distanced themselves from Les Oiseaux Fous, and, in 1998, embarked on their first big rural tour as a company, with two new performers joining in 1999 for *Aucun Souci dans l'angle mort*, a claustrophobic silent piece depicting a dysfunctional nuclear family. In 2001, the company acquired their second marquee, a theatre-tent that can hold up to two hundreds seats, and continued touring as an extended company, increasingly experimenting with generic boundaries. *Polar* (2002) for example, described as a "déravage chorégraphique",⁹⁶ is aesthetically inspired by thriller movies. During these years on the road, the company learnt how to accommodate the demands of travel and family life. Vehicles were adapted and became bathrooms, studies, laundry

⁹⁶ "Choreographic wipeout".

room; a caravan was turned into a classroom where the children, who accompanied their parents on the road, were schooled by a travelling teacher. In 2005 however, Escale settled down in the town of Joué-lès-Tours, in the Centre county. The town lent the company a large parcel of land and an old barn where the administrative headquarters of the company were installed. Hollenstein and Krausse started then hosting on the site other companies, often themselves equipped with caravans. Despite the transfer of the company's archive and offices to the barn, company members continue, until today, to live in caravans and to use the marquee for rehearsals and touring.

Settling down did not mean that Escale stopped travelling. After Europe, Escale stopped over in Western Africa, for a tour in collaboration with Togolese company Aktion Theatre: *Contes à Rebours* (2005). If Escale's newfound semi-sedentariness did not directly influence their work, the creation in 2007 of *Des Mots derrière la vitre* opened a new phase in the company's aesthetic research. For the first time in their artistic history, the company committed to exploring what could emerge from the combination of text and movement. The show, created for five performers, consisted of duets and soli mixing high physicality with contemporary literature. The success of the experiment inspired Escale to work on their most ambitious production: *Façades*, created in 2008 in collaboration with playwright Sonia Chiambretto, who was responsible for writing a text in parallel of the devising process. However, Escale was disappointed by the final production, and, drained by many tensions inside the company and the emotional and material cost of what they saw as a relative failure, the project to tour the show was abandoned. Having returned to work with a much smaller team, the company collaborated with the writer Philippe

Fenwick on *Est ou Ouest* (2009), an agit-prop show intended to be a one-off. The piece was well received, which prompted Escale to tour again. The year 2009, when I met the company and conducted the first of the “fieldworks” that were to make up the case studies of this thesis, was dedicated to reflexivity. The company celebrated their then twentieth birthday, and were engaged in a new phase of artistic research, epitomised by *Est ou Ouest*. Since 2010, the company has toured *Est ou Ouest* across France, took part in *Atavisme*, a creation by Philippe Fenwick in which the cast travelled with the Transsiberian Railway from Brest, Brittany, to Vladivostok, Russia, and more recently developed work with puppets (*D’Un souffle tu chavires* 2013).

There is for Escale a strong connection between being “théâtre du mouvement” and “théâtre en mouvement”.⁹⁷ The expression “théâtre du mouvement” used to describe their work is characteristic of the rhetoric used by “physical theatres” companies working in the French context: coining a term is always better than using a terminology that feels incomplete. “En mouvement” evokes the formative dimension of *itinérance* for the company. I use the French term *itinérance* here, for the way it encapsulates the company’s way of life whilst evoking the English adjective “itinerant”. *Itinérance* is also the official term used to describe the lifestyle of travelling companies in France and is the word most companies that belong to these networks would use to describe themselves. As summarised by this maxim, Escale see their lifestyle as informing their artistic work. Hollenstein mentions for instance, about the first years the company toured with their own marquee:

⁹⁷ “Theatre of movement” and “theatre in movement”. These terms appear on the “Présentation” page of the company’s website. The expression “théâtre en mouvement” also appears in the company’s logo.

on menait une vie totalement cohérente, sur notre travail artistique, qui avait trouvé sa liberté puisqu'on avait notre propre théâtre, sur nos déplacements, et puis sur la prise de parole... (“Interview”).⁹⁸

Escale perceives *itinérance* as what gives them freedom to create and curate the work they want, and is for them embedded in and justified by a political agenda. Their lifestyle also constituted a feature that I, as a researcher, could not ignore: meeting and researching the company, at the end of October 2009, meant sharing Hollenstein and Krausse’s working and living space in Joué-lès-Tours. My record of their work (the rehearsals and the performance I attended, the video recordings that were put at my disposal) is informed by the way I experienced the fieldwork. It indeed enabled me to both contextualise the company’s work within a wider cultural framework, whilst grounding it in a somatic account of it. Whilst I approached the fieldwork with no pre-established methodology – I was adamant to let the experience guide me in these early stages of the research - Novack’s definition retroactively illustrates the way I conducted the research: focusing on “the interplay” between “conceptual ... experiments with the dance form itself”, “the lives and perspectives of the ... participants”, “the responses of the viewers” and “the means through which dance is organized and produced” (*Sharing* 15), all dimensions that were enabled by my immersion into the life of the company.

⁹⁸ “The life we lived had become completely coherent, because our artistic work had found its freedom since we owned our own theatre, because of our travels and the fact that we could speak up...”

Escale, being “théâtre du mouvement” and “théâtre en mouvement”, provide a particularly interesting case study to explore the ways movement challenges strict divisions between the spaces of the theatre. Escale’s spaces are, by definition, porous. Similarly, the way movement lies at the core of Escale’s artistic endeavours, but also underlies their lifestyle, questions notions of intimacy. With the company associating *itinérance* with a political agenda, and with their decision to operate in a medium that is under-represented in France, questions concerning the potentially subversive dimension of movement in “physical theatres” are at the core of the company’s research. In the following chapter, I examine how Escale’s intimacies in movement are used to embody politics, and how they may become subversive. I highlight however how these endeavours might also be discredited by the company’s reliance on state subsidies, essential to the company’s survival.

First, I focus on Escale’s mobile spaces and examine how they disrupt understandings of “home” while presenting the company’s *itinérance* as radical. I then observe how the relationships between spaces and intimacies are at the core of Escale’s artistic work, to then analyse Escale’s “political” physicality and the way it connects with their recent decision to speak out.

Mobile spaces

Escale’s *itinérance*

In the Introduction to this thesis I noted that, in a French context, “physical theatres” and especially *créations collectives* were often associated with a political agenda. Practitioners indeed often address political topics in their shows, or at least there is the underlying assumption that to belong to these

networks is to agree with, and to put in practice, a mode of organisation that is in accordance with an (extreme) Left-wing ideology. Often marginal, and due to their ongoing historical relationship with street art and circus aesthetics, “physical theatres” of the “mime et arts du geste” tradition tend to share the same networks as these two disciplines. In the case of Escale, the company’s *itinérance* contributes to locating them within these networks. The political ideals that underlie many of these companies’ artistic productions permeate their lifestyles. An important number of companies belonging to these networks are *itinérantes*, living and working on the roads and operating on a horizontal basis, with members involved in most stages of the creation, but also participating in the get-ins and get-outs and contributing to a collective lifestyle. These values constitute the cornerstones of the “Charte” established by the Centre International pour les Théâtres Itinérants, initiated by the then France-bound Cornish Fooks Travelling Theatre.⁹⁹ The “Charte” lists a series of points that *itinérant* companies who wish to be part of the association agree on, and that are meant to define them. The list mentions for example “les compétences multiples des membres de leur équipe” and suggests that *itinérant* theatres “contribu[ent] à la démocratisation et à la décentralisation artistique” (“Charte”).¹⁰⁰ It shall be noted however that these companies, proposing alternative forms of organisation, are nonetheless eligible for state funding - aimed specifically at circus and street performance artists - in the form of an “Aide à l’itinérance”. This “aide”, despite requirements that automatically exclude smaller companies, highlights the acknowledgement at an institutional level that *itinérant* practices are part of

⁹⁹ The CITI (International Centre for Itinerant Theatre) founded in 1999, promotes *itinérant* theatre on an international scale. Hugues Hollenstein was president of the CITI between 2000 and 2007.

¹⁰⁰ “The multiple competences of their teams’ members”; “contribute to democratisation and artistic decentralisation”.

French performance culture, albeit mostly equating *itinérance* with circus, as exemplified in the terminology used in official documents.¹⁰¹

If Escale in particular and *itinérant* practices in general receive public funding and are thus partly dependent on their relationship with the State, many *itinérant* and street performance artists construct their identity around the idea that they belong to a counter-culture, a position reiterated in many of these artists' alternative lifestyles. Susan Haedicke notes the success of street performance in France, and shows how, despite these artists being often "radical", street performance "did ... develop, diversify and enter the mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s". Haedicke notes how this success is specific to France, and suggests that "state support both in terms of funding and innovative populist cultural policies", including "the establishment of numerous funded street theatre festivals", contributed to the development of the art form (163). She also suggests as a reason for this success that "less tangible, but of equal importance, is the history of protest and other populist activities in public spaces" (163), thus clearly linking the street with the protest. In the case of Escale, *itinérance* locates them simultaneously outside institutional theatre buildings and inscribe them in this perceived association of street performance with the radical.

Escale is an exemplar of these characteristics of *itinérant* companies. Their lifestyle is greatly informed by Hollenstein and Krausse's political opinions, which are unequivocally situated on the extreme Left. Meals I shared

¹⁰¹ Stating for example that to be eligible, companies must perform "au minima 30 représentations d'un ou plusieurs spectacles de cirque présentés sous le chapiteau" ("at least 30 public performances of one or several circus shows, performed under the big top"). They also stipulate that the companies must already own a marquee, and the funding cannot be used towards "les coûts liés à l'achat du matériel itinérant, mais les frais spécifiques de l'itinérance: coût de montage et démontage, frais d'approche (fioul, autoroute...), coût de maintien courant du matériel, hors amortissements" ("meeting the costs linked to the purchase of itinerant material, but towards the costs specific to *itinérance*: construction and deconstruction of the marquee, transportation costs (petrol, motorways...), costs related to material maintenance, excluding redemption." ("Aide à l'itinérance des cirques").

with the company were often the site of political debates and discussions about Socialist ideology, and the company's latest shows at the time of the fieldwork, *Façades* and *Est ou ouest*, both dealing with the partition of Germany until the fall of the Wall, very clearly addressed the disillusionment of Capitalism and called for a reconsideration of Socialism. The company's decision to tour to rural areas of France, where theatre is not always easily accessible, or to organise circus and theatre workshops for high school students, was also presented by the company as motivated by a political commitment. Finally, the fact that the company produces highly physical pieces in France contributes to their location on the margins of French cultural visibility, where theatre is still often dependent on a literary approach. Escale's position in the French context is therefore characterised by their mobility, by the ways it inscribes them in generic margins, and how they associate it with a political message.

However, the fact that Escale's *itinérance* is largely permitted by public funding already problematises their claim to outsider status. On the one hand, that they travel by their own means supposes Escale operate on another time-scale – and geographic area – than most of France's economic life. In this respect, they are outsiders, working on geographical margins. They use to their audience's benefit what John Urry has termed in *Mobilities* the “range of mobility-systems” that are the sign of a “rich[] society” (51). Urry argues that inequalities are born of a different access to these “mobility-systems”. By going to meet their audience, and using to do so public subsidy, Escale partially bridge such inequalities. On the other hand however, what includes them in the *itinérants* networks, which, we have seen, often claim radical status, is the fact that they receive public funding. Urry maintains that there are “four components

to the notion of “access”, which are “economic, physical, organizational, and temporal” (191). All four dimensions are precisely granted to Escale thanks to State subsidy. Indeed, from a very pragmatic point of view and since, according to Urry, “all mobilities require *economic* resources”, there is little doubt that benefiting from “aide à l’itinérance” is precisely being given the opportunity to use such “*economic* resources” towards being mobile. The fact that Escale’s travels and installation are very rarely illicit and require prior authorisation from local authorities, doubly underlines the “physical” requirement that enable their access to ““point of contact” through ownership or availability” of means of communication, especially so since Escale can afford – again, thanks to public funding – to hire an administrator. The “organizational” and “temporal” components of their ability to “access” are bound to the fact that, travelling by their own means and financially enabled to do so through public funding, Escale have organizational and temporal freedom, a luxury that communities that are subjected to “social exclusion” do not have at their disposal (191). These dimensions highlight how Escale do not operate on margins so much than within an institutional system that is very precisely mapped out, and that problematises their claim to radical outsiders status. Therefore, it is rather in the way they choose to use these resources to live and work, and in the display they make of such choices, that Escale provide an alternative.

Public homes

Escale’s *itinérance* constitutes the foundation of both their artistic project and their political commitment. *Itinérance* suggests that movement is very much at the core of the company’s endeavours, both artistically and geographically.

Escale's movement is also used to question notions of intimacy and the idea of a strict division between inside and outside: *itinérance* here questions notions of "home". The company's intimate spaces, their caravans, are mobile and displayed as such. A caravan as a "home" space questions ideas of enclosure, of interiority and exteriority. It simultaneously gives a feeling of being perfectly closed on itself, whilst being inherently moveable and transportable. The caravan constitutes in itself a potent source of images: it operates like the casket Gaston Bachelard describes in *Poetics of Space*, a box that contains intimacy and annihilates the outside when open. In Bachelardian terms: "[f]rom the moment the casket is opened, dialectics no longer exist. The outside is effaced with one stroke" (85). In this respect, the caravan operates like the traditional Western bedroom, as linguist Marie-Luce Honeste-Fliti examines in a study of the way "home" is perceived in the French language. Analysing this from a linguistic perspective highlights the way Escale themselves present the caravans as their "home" spaces. Honeste-Fliti analyses for example that a room, which the French call "chambre", has a "valeur privative", and evokes altogether:

lieu où l'on dort ... où l'on ne reçoit pas; dimensions réduites, clôture, isolement ... confort et chaleur, protection maximale, perte de conscience, position couchée, espace du dedans. (100)¹⁰²

The caravan appears as an archetypal intimate space of "reduced dimensions", isolated, and with enough space for one to lie in, defined by its closeness and the seeming "protection maximale" it offers.

¹⁰² "A privative value"; "a place where one sleeps ... where one does not receive guests; reduced dimensions, enclosure, isolation ... comfort and warmth, maximal protection, losing consciousness, lie-in position, space of the inside."

When Escale tour with the marquee, the caravans play an essential role in the way the company present themselves. It is the combination of the marquee and the caravans around it that creates Escale's settlement, and transforms the spaces the company momentarily inhabits. Hollenstein mentions in an interview that the company "tient à ce que les caravans soient autour du chapiteau" ("Paroles de voyageurs"),¹⁰³ creating what has been perceived by commentators as a "mini village" (Ballista), emphasising this idea that caravans operate as signifiers of a home space. But more than a "village", the combination of the marquee and the camp creates a space that blurs boundaries between the different theatrical spaces. The marquee and the caravans simultaneously constitute what Gay McAuley identifies as "performance spaces", "rehearsal spaces", "public" and "private" spaces (94). Ideas of interiority and conceptions of intimate spaces are disrupted by the fact that the camp and the tent are altogether defined by all these functions. The caravans around the marquee blur the separation between "performance space" and "practitioner space". McAuley defines the latter as being the most private areas of a theatre building, the ones, such as the dressing rooms, for example, that are not usually open to the public (63). In the case of Escale, these spaces are visible to anybody: the intimate spaces of the artists are opened to everybody's view for they are contained within the caravans or the lorries that accompany the tent, and constitute the camp where the audiences are welcomed. The caravans that, at the time Escale were a full-time itinerant company, hosted the administrative office and the bathroom would for instance respectively become box-office and lavatories when a show was on, thus

¹⁰³ "Insist on having the caravans around the marquee".

transformed from private spaces into public ones by the very fact that they were suddenly open to the *public*.



Figure 1 - Escale's "mini-village".
Photos by Xavier Oliveiro.

I argued earlier that Escale's caravans operate similarly to Bachelard's casket. McAuley borrows Bachelard's image and, tellingly, applies the poetics of the casket to the theatre stage: "[c]onstantly playing with the possibilities of revelation, between the shown and the not-shown, the shown and the partially shown" (75). In the case of Escale's settlement, these dynamics are at work on a wider scale: the caravans are "caskets", and so is the stage, contained within the marquee. Together, the caravans and the marquee are an integral part of the theatrical event, for the way they create and frame specific expectations about the show. By turning private spaces into public spaces, Escale's settlement puts on display the company's atypical lifestyle. The whole settlement becomes "presentational space": "both the architectural features of the stage as it exists in any given theatre ... and the organization of this space for the production in question" (McAuley 79).

If on most occasions, the actual performance happens inside the marquee, the spaces that exist “outside” the marquee but within the boundaries of the camp become spaces for the performance of *itinérance*. This is corroborated by the presence of the company members, performers-to-be, who welcome spectators, getting ready for a show or simply living their everyday lives. In the case of Escale, at least two levels of what McAuley identifies as being the “semiotic function of the person of the performer” (94) are constantly activated. In the performance-before-the-performance they display by inviting audiences to meet them within their settlement, Escale’s performers are at the same time “[t]he actor him – or herself physically present in the space” (94) and the “stage figure”, the one situated in between the actor’s persona and the character s/he embodies, which McAuley defines as being “the physical manifestation of the character or persona constructed by the actor and the other artists involved in that production” (94). Escale’s performers, physically present in the space of the settlement before any show, perform *itinérance*, a feature that the blurred boundaries between the different spaces of the settlement allow. In this respect, they also blur boundaries between their private and public personae: they are simultaneously performers and “themselves”: the distinction between the private and the public is blurred. In this respect, intimate realms are seemingly opened to the public and contribute to coining a definition of collective intimacy by displaying the communal mode of living of the company.

By performing in different spaces, in spaces used for the performance of *itinérance*, Escale have found a way of performing a political agenda, displaying alternative ways of living and of making theatre, even when the show performed does not have any apparent political topic or is aesthetically rather conservative.

In these cases, Escale perform political theatre, but less in the topic of their productions than the very specific lifestyle they choose to display. In this respect, their lifestyle as *itinérants* becomes radical, in Baz Kershaw's understanding:

The freedom [it] invokes is not just freedom *from* oppression, repression, exploitation – the resistant sense of the radical – but also freedom *to reach beyond* existing systems of formalised power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action (*The Radical* 18).

If Escale's "forms of association and action" are in no way "unimaginable", first because of the resemblance they bear to existing forms of communal living and nomadic lifestyle, such as the ones displayed by many circus companies, they however offer other models for living and for touring performance. They disrupt pre-conceptions, displaying how a company that receives funding from institutions can produce other forms of association. This freedom of action, association, and creation is what commentators observe from the outside: "un vrai esprit de troupe, de famille" (Ballista), making theatre "loin des temples de l'art confortable" (Y.C.).¹⁰⁴ These are characteristics Escale carry with them and with their settlement; they contribute to fuelling a romantic ideal of *itinérantes* companies, perceived as alternative models of collaboration and connected with ideals of community.

¹⁰⁴ "True spirit of a troupe, of a family", a theatre "far from the temples of comfortable art". This idea of Escale as an alternative miniature society often appears in press articles, and the artists are aware of this ideal that they bring along with them when settling down in a town. They are described as "saltimbanques" ("minstrels") (Y.C.), and they are perceived as representing "les racines du théâtre" ("the roots of theatre"), making work "avec un supplément d'âme" ("with a top up of soul") (Ballista).

In *On The Move*, Tim Cresswell identifies what he terms, after anthropologist Lissa Malkki, a “nomadic metaphysics” that equates mobility with “forms of subaltern power” and “practices of transgression and resistance” (46). As illustrated by these reviews, Escale seem first to participate in a “nomadic metaphysics” (43): their mobility is presented as a “practice[] of transgression and resistance”. Cresswell uses Deleuze and Guattari’s models of “smooth” and “striated” spaces to develop this “nomadic metaphysics”: in urban spaces, “smooth” and “striated” spaces “pay off one another in a constant dialectic tension| (49). “Smooth space” is defined as “the space of the nomad – a horizontal space that resists and threatens the vertical striations of power” (49), which Deleuze and Guattari describe as “money, work, or housing” (qtd in Cresswell 49). Escale, through *itinérance*, are perceived as operating within these “smooth spaces” that escape the striations of institutionalised power: their homes are mobile, their workspace is distinct from “comfortable” theatre buildings... However, I have shown how Escale owe their subsistence almost exclusively to public funding, through their status of *compagnie conventionnée* for instance,¹⁰⁵ and the “aide à l’itinérance” that enables their lifestyle. Their status as outsiders who would operate on the margins of the French theatrical landscape, is not only enabled but, as I have shown, promoted by the institution they are supposedly outside of. In this respect, Escale operate on the “striated spaces” of institutional power perhaps more than on the “smooth space” of the nomad. This does not mean Escale do not promote a radical way of living and working, in Kershaw’s understanding of the term, but rather that the conditions that subtend this status are far from being radical themselves.

¹⁰⁵ When conventionnée, a company receives government funding over three years, providing they make at least two new productions and perform at least 70 times over this period. (“Aide à la compagnie conventionnée”)

To invite audiences “chez nous, chez eux”¹⁰⁶

During an interview I conducted with Hollenstein and Krausse, Hollenstein¹⁰⁷ expressed the idea that, with the tent, “c’est pas juste un spectacle, c’est tout un univers qu’[ils] transporte[nt]”.¹⁰⁸ Escale’s spaces work as pockets of intimacy, and the marquee may be the one space that most epitomises Hollenstein’s statement. Settling down means Escale bring their “home” to other people’s “homes”, an idea expressed by Krausse in these words: “inviter les gens chez nous, chez eux”. Translating this expression which also used to appear on the “Charte” of the CITI is not without difficulty. The English language lacks a term as rich as the French “chez-soi”; in this case, the best translation in English would need to encompass both the terms “home” and “home-place”, as this is also what Escale’s marquee provides: a “home-place” within other people’s “home-space” that questions the broader notion of “home” as belonging and as property. Honeste-Fliti analyses the word “chez”, only used as a preposition in contemporary French, as “[o]rienté vers le fait d’habiter plutôt que vers la designation du lieu dans lequel s’effectue ce procès. L’habitat n’est plus un lieu, mais une action” (90).¹⁰⁹ The “chez nous” Escale create with their settlement is constructed by the company’s “action” of making it their home and their home-place. This action is both physical and relational: it is the action of setting up a tent and installing caravans; it is also the action of opening the settlement to the public, making this “habitat” a destination for them.

¹⁰⁶ “In our home, in their home”.

¹⁰⁷ I am aware of the prominence of Hollenstein’s words in discourses about the company’s work, when Krausse plays an equal part in making what the company is. The imbalance might be explained by the fact that Hollenstein often works as a director for the company, while Krausse appeared to be more focused on performing. Hollenstein also seemed very keen on theorising their work and discussing it with me, something Krausse did not seem as passionate about.

¹⁰⁸ “[They] not only carry a show, but a whole universe”.

¹⁰⁹ “Orientated toward the function of “living in” rather than toward designating the place in which this process is made effective. Habitat is not just a place but an action.”

This idea that “chez nous” is less a place than an action is made clear by the processes of Escale’s installation. The “place” they turn into a home needs to be wide and empty enough for Escale to drive into its ground the foundations of their tent. In fact, the tent is remarkable as it creates an interior out of a space characterised by its “exteriority”. In order for the marquee to be settled, the space has to be at the same time somebody else’s “home” and an “empty” space, where no other building exists. The fact that Escale disturbs conceptions of “home” was clearly apparent to them on several occasions. Hollenstein recalls an elderly villager walking in a straight line across the foundations of Escale’s marquee, amidst baffled company members she did not acknowledge. Both Krause and Hollenstein interpret this attitude as one of defiance, as if to signify to the company that they were not “at home” (Interview). As noted by another *itinérant*, Antoine Manceau, in a discussion on the theme of travelling theatre in which Hollenstein and Krause participated: “[d]’abord, le premier jour, la boulangère se méfie un peu. Après, dès qu’elle voit le spectacle, elle est tout sourire et nous offre des croissants” (“Paroles de voyageurs” 25).¹¹⁰ The action of energising the space of the camp, through performance, activated the company’s function and the purpose for its presence.

Hollenstein recognises this in the same article: “nous sommes extrêmement privilégiés en tant qu’itinérants. ... On est accueillis. Ce n’est pas du tout la vie des peuples nomades qui sont en cohabitation avec les sédentaires” (25).¹¹¹ Manceau and Hollenstein’s comments highlight how differently their mobility as *itinérants* is perceived. Cresswell analyses how “[g]ypsies and other

¹¹⁰ “On the first day, the baker is a bit suspicious. Then, as soon as she sees the show, she’s all smiles and gives us croissants.”

¹¹¹ “We are extremely privileged as *itinérants*... We are welcome. It is absolutely not the same situation for nomadic peoples who cohabit with sedentary people.”

travellers”, who operate on the “smooth spaces” of the urban landscape, “have suffered hostility since medieval times when they were seen as worrisome “people without place” who had the potential to upset the place-bound order of feudalism” (42). Cresswell notes that “[t]heir mobility is [still] seen as a threat, and the thinking that goes into planning for them emphasizes legibility and order” (42). Escalé’s mobility, on the other hand, is perceived positively as soon as the motivation behind it has been established. Once they have performed the show, their mobility ceases to be threatening and is perceived as freedom.

Paradoxically, Escalé’s mobility promotes a sedentary dimension. A “sedentarist metaphysics”, according to Malkki to whom Cresswell borrows his definition, “sees mobility through the lens of place, rootedness, spatial order, and belonging” (26). The fact that Escalé relies not only on state funding, but, on a practical level, on local authorities with whom they have created an ongoing relationship and that allow them to install their settlement, feeds into this idea. Indeed, Escalé comply with established geographical and institutional patterns. Unlike nomadic people, Escalé and *itinérants* are not seen as “people without place”, but as people who carry along their own space and who come from *another* place, echoing Cresswell’s point that in a sedentarist metaphysics “movement is explained by the place that is being left and the place of arrival” (29) rather than by the journey between the two. Despite being “théâtre en mouvement”, Escalé *itinérance* becomes “sedentary”, a dimension that means the radicalism wished for by the company runs the risk of being undermined by its associations with dominant economic and institutional powers.

The tent as a pocket of intimacy

I have shown how the tent is used to display the company's intimacy. When Escale settle in a town, the tent reverses boundaries between private and public spaces, enabling them to become guests who, in turn, invite their hosts. The tent is also activated as a *pocket of intimacy* in performance. Hollenstein considers the tent both an intimate space and a space for intimacy, in that it gives the audience the feeling of being privileged, of witnessing an event happening especially for them. This is reinforced by the fact that the show is brought to them from somewhere else, as a journalist noted: “[Escale] n’attendent pas leur public, mais vont à sa rencontre.” (Y.C.).¹¹² The marquee also operates as a space for intimate encounters on a phenomenological level, due to the close physical proximity between audience and performers, and in a way that reverses boundaries between the inside and the outside, indoors and outdoors. In an article titled “Weather”, David Williams explores the relationship between weather and performance. Acknowledging the “generative possibilities of weather’s creative agency within the work - ... as co-author or events where site is conceived as active medium” (143), Williams explores “weather indoors”, whether it is “formally representational and consciously framed as artifice” or “more complex in terms of perception and embodied immersion” (143). Williams moves on to encompass sweat as a generator of such indoor weather. Looking at Lone Twin performers Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters, Williams analyses how their “hot sweating bodies *literally* steam to become further imbricated in the hydrological cycle”, which Williams sees as “enactments of a poetics, economy and ecology of transformation, circulation and inter-connection” (143). In the confined space

¹¹² “Do not wait for their audience to come, they go ahead and meet them.”

of the marquee, the sweat that emanates from the glistening skin of the performers, as one can see in footage of *Contes à rebours*, or the fog created by Krausse's breath when temperatures are less clement, as I could see on that cold afternoon when I first attended Escale's rehearsals, in November 2009, and the audience's own secretions become together "imbricated in the hydrological cycle", evaporating in clouds that, in Williams' words, "actualise an ephemeral passage that soon dematerialises, leaving in their trail a palpable density of associations and metaphorical after-lives" (143). The tent encapsulates a "palpable", material intimacy between performers and audience members, who *touch* each other through evaporation and condensation. These "clouds" inside the marquee provoke a subtle reversing of the frontier between in- and outdoors. Whilst defined primarily by its "outdoor" quality, as opposed to the "indoor" quality of theatre buildings, the tent provides a shelter against the actual "outdoor" and its most characteristic element: the weather. Paradoxically, Escale's tent encapsulates indoor clouds whilst delimiting the boundaries that the *other* weather, the one "outside", cannot trespass.

Disrupting geographies.

Escale's mobility allows them to choose where, when they arrive in a town, they want to settle. Of course, this decision depends on many other factors: they need legal authorisation, the mayor's approval, and several material constraints limit their range of choice.¹¹³ When they settle in a village or during a festival, the place where Escale decide to set up their marquee and caravans is potently meaningful. The sociological and political significance of the location of

¹¹³ For the entire camp to be settled for example, Escale need water and electricity connections. .

a theatre building in a city has been well commented, notably in the work of Gay McAuley (*Space in Performance*) or David Wiles (*A Short History*). McAuley identifies the social geographies attached to theatre buildings in Paris for example, comparing Théâtre de Chaillot, established in the bourgeois 16th district, and Théâtre Gérard Philippe, situated in Saint-Denis, one of the Paris suburbs that hosts several estates. She indicates how the decision of locating a building dedicated to culture outside of the capital, to its culturally excluded outskirts, was motivated by an attempt to provide a better and broader access to culture and to make it available for those who could not afford to live in Paris.¹¹⁴ Similarly, Escale's *itinérance* allows them to settle in strategic places, and to therefore disrupt the everyday while organising a platform from which to speak up. Both Hollenstein and Krausse have evoked how important it is that the camp is installed, as much as possible, in the centre of villages ("Interview").¹¹⁵ In doing so, Escale provide a specific tribune for themselves: for their shows to be seen, and for their voices to be heard, complying with a way of seeing "the *nomad*" "as a particular symbol of transience that disrupts ... bounded value system[s]" (Cresswell 36). Hollenstein, for instance, recalls:

Avec les maires, on se permettait des remarques pas possibles sur
l'administration de la ville, parce qu'on la vivait de l'intérieur

¹¹⁴ McAuley also notes the failure of this specific political endeavour, with audiences attending performances at Théâtre Gérard Philippe being mostly Parisians rather than local Saint-Denis inhabitants.

¹¹⁵ Krausse also regretted that most of these central squares were now often covered with concrete or occupied by flower benches that made it increasingly difficult.

quoi, et nous en plus on était de passage donc on n'avait pas de pouvoir en plus à attendre de ça. ("Interview")¹¹⁶

There is for Hollenstein a link between being able to speak out and being simultaneously "here" and from "somewhere else". Significantly too, the idea that, since the company had no expectation of any political power they might gain from speaking out, their message was uncorrupted, echoes a rhetoric that equates lack of power – or lack of a desire for power – with the voice of the people. The company reproduced this strategy in 2003 when they attended the Avignon festival. Escale implanted their settlement in a touristy part of the town, which provided them very high visibility, and went on a strike to contest the Government's plans to modify the *intermittent* status.¹¹⁷ Escale's strategies recall the ones used by new circus, as Tait identifies in *Circus Bodies*: to present themselves and to be perceived as "self-contained world[s] outside mainstream culture" (126),¹¹⁸ connecting their mobility with "practices of transgression and resistance" (Cresswell 43).

Escale's mobile spaces question and disrupt conceptions of intimate spaces, of "home", and open a breach in spectators' everyday lives. That Escale

¹¹⁶ "We used to address unbelievably bold comments to mayors about the way the towns were administered, and that was because we were living the situation from the inside, but also we were only there in passing, so we didn't have any specific power to gain from that."

¹¹⁷ The status of *intermittent du spectacle* is exceptional to France. Artists and technicians working in the performing arts can benefit from the status, which acknowledges these professions' inherent precariousness. Many workers are indeed hired on fixed term contracts, which implies that they might not be able to work for parts of the tax year. The State grants "intermittents" unemployment benefits for the periods where they do not work, providing they have worked 507 hours over the course of ten and a half months for artists, ten months for technicians. The "intermittent" status is periodically disputed by successive governments and is deemed controversial by a large proportion of the French population. Most attempts at reforming the status have seen workers in the industry go on strike or disrupt major cultural events, such as the Avignon festival, in an attempt to protect the status.

¹¹⁸ Stereotypes widely distributed, Tait argues, by circus literature. In fact, many examples show circus' compliance in moments of its history with social or political norms. One may think for example of the ways female aerialists were depicted as feminine, producing "a socially conformist female aerial identity" (55).

are there “de passage”, “in passing”, to borrow Hollenstein’s words, along with the fact that Escale work with a genre of performance mostly invisible in the French theatrical context, situate the company on the fringes of the country’s geography and seemingly on the fringes of the French theatre industry. Following Baz Kershaw who, drawing on Lefebvre’s concept of the theatre building as “shaped by the ruling ideologies”, argues that performances happening inside theatre buildings are “deeply embedded in theatre as a *disciplinary system*” (*Radical in Performance* 31), Escale’s performance of *itinérance*, and the shows they perform under their marquees, locate them outside the “disciplinary system” that the theatre building is seen as constituting. I have however highlighted how this position is in fact less straightforward than it seems, with the company’s reliance on institutional support. Nevertheless, Escale’s theatre space epitomises *itinérance*, and on a symbolic level, suggests an alternative model for making and for experiencing theatre, through the way it challenges notions of proximity, openness and closure.

Physicality in movement

Escale see a strong connection between their lifestyle and their artistic work, and an experience of *itinérance* informs their aesthetics. I do not contest that Escale’s creative processes resemble those of several other companies. However, because the company’s *itinérance* is what they acknowledge as one of the major influences on their work, I take into account what Novack calls “the interplay” between “the technical and conceptual developments and experiments with the dance form itself” and “the lives and perspectives of the ... participants” (*Sharing the Dance* 15). This is also particularly relevant given that my

experience of Escale's work was deeply informed by my experience of their lifestyle during the fieldwork.

Movement and spaces in Escale's creative processes: An analysis of *Façades* (2008)

An interrogation on space, and on spaces that are themselves mobile, is the base of Escale's devising processes. When I interrogated Hollenstein and Krause on the genesis of the company's productions, Hollenstein stated that, as a director, he would very early on visualise the theme of a show in terms of set. He described Escale's work as happening "presque toujours avec un décor, en general mobile, [qui] induit aussi une façon de bouger" ("Interview").¹¹⁹ The set has to be thought of in kinetic terms, and thus on two different levels: how it can be used by the performers to devise movement; and how it can be transported and built on tour. Like most companies and artists who tour productions by their own means, Escale's sets need to be easily transportable and quickly installed.¹²⁰

The fact that Escale's sets need to be easily transportable contradicts the necessity for these sets to be mobile so as to create movement. The set of *Façades* (2008) provides a perfect example of this contradictory relationship. *Façades*, which evokes walls "visibles ou invisibles" ("Façades"),¹²¹ is about the fall of the Berlin wall and the broken promises that came subsequently for "ELLE", who lived in East Berlin while dreaming of being reunited with her

¹¹⁹ "Almost always with a set, that is often mobile, [which] also inspires a way of moving".

¹²⁰ This question is certainly even more crucial in the case of small-scale touring companies. The way these artists think of their mobility, and their relationship with questions of "home", are issues that are worth exploring.

¹²¹ "Visibles or invisibles".

lover in the West.¹²² One of the show's key scenes is organised around the installation of three 2m per 1m Plexiglas walls in a line that separates the circular stage in two. The walls are solidly embedded in heavy concrete bases that allow them to stand still, but also to easily bend back and forth. These walls exemplify Escale's need for sets that can be easily moved from one space to the other – each base can be transported by two to four persons, and the three bases do not take up much room when stored together. At the same time, these walls provide enough resistance for the performers to safely use them in devising and in performance. The Plexiglas walls echo the theme of the show, serving as a thematic reminder and as a very physical and material obstacle.

The translucent walls are on stage from the beginning of the show. Photocopied faces are stuck onto the walls, after being stamped by a border police officer. The performers queue in a line in front of the officer's desk, waiting for their turn. After a third of the performance, three performers pull the walls on a lead and bring them mid-stage. The leads allow the bodies of the performers to show the heaviness of the walls, exposing their muscles with the intensity of the effort. The walls are aligned, with a 70cm gap between each one, and the performers who brought the walls on stage exit. The following scene starts whilst the words "a wall is broken" resonate, sung from speakers. Six performers dance with and around the Plexiglas frontiers. They run toward the walls and stop only a few centimetres away from the plastic, their bodies seemingly stopped in their course by the wall. The performers hang back for a second, suspended, registering the shock of the encounter. While the performers' movements express the violence of flesh being stopped at high speed by concrete

¹²² I did not see *Façades* live, as the company stopped performing the show shortly before I met them. I am therefore referring, for this analysis, to a video recorded on the 30th of June 2008.

or similarly robust materials, the action happening on stage is relatively smooth. The performers do not encounter the wall: they stop before the shock and hang in the air. However, by moment, the performers “break” the wall: walking on Plexiglas makes it bend. The walls become bridges, held onto the floor by the weight and movement of the performers, and spring back to their initial upright position once the weight is released. Sometimes, there is someone behind the wall. One’s crossing therefore has to happen at the expense of this other person: curled up at the base of the walls, performers seemingly support the weight of their partners. When finally liberation is possible, the movements seem less of a release than a forceful passing through: the Plexiglas stays upright for a while, before bending suddenly under the performer’s weight; violently pushed onto the floor, it reaches it with a brutal sound. This image is even more violent when another body is clutched under the wall, or when two performers, on each side of the Plexiglas, seem to fight for their crossing by swinging the wall to each other.



Figure 2 - *Façades*. Photo by Hervé Lambrech

If there is a significant tension between these walls and the fact that they are essentially mobile, another tension operates between the presence on stage of

walls in a performance space characteristically defined by its absence of solid walls and by its capacity for mobility. These dialectical relationships between mobility and stillness activate the show's dimension of contestation: the walls evoked by the performers' movements are questioned by the fact that these performers seemingly live an existence with *no* walls, which is associated with an idea of freedom. Movement in this context is used to underline this inherent tension. The way the audience experiences, in an act of kinaesthetic empathy, the violence of the Plexiglas walls activates the show's potential contestation in a way that is *felt*.



Figure 3 - *Façades*. Photo by Hervé Lambrecht

Subversive physicality

Movement constitutes the essence of Escale's everyday lives and underlies the company's aesthetics. It has also permeated the performers' intimacies by shaping their physicality through both training and *itinérance*.

Krausse, Hollenstein and their collaborators bear the marks of their specific training: repeated movement has shaped Escale's artistic and political ideals and has marked Escale's physicalities. Krausse for example has the wide trapezes, muscled arms and thin waist of aerial artists. In this, I join many other commentators who have analysed the dancing body – and I extend the definition to the performing body in a wider sense – as constructed and informed by training. (Novack *Sharing the Dance*; Thomas *The Body*; Foster “Choreographing History”; *Dances That Describe Themselves*). Susan Leigh Foster's proposition that “not only the training programme but also the rehearsal process contribute[s] to the formation of a specific corporeality” (*Dances That Describe Themselves* 148) is, in Escale's case, opened beyond the realm of the rehearsal process and into the wider framework where most of the company's activities take place: *itinérance*.

Alternative physicalities

Because Escale's artists perform highly skilled physical actions but are also absolutely polyvalent in terms of technique, and deal with the benefits and sacrifices of a nomadic life, they bear the marks of intense training and of years of *itinérance*. Krausse and Hollenstein's repeated gestures, both artistic and technical, have entered the texture of their flesh similarly to the way Sally Ann Ness analyses dance gestures leave a mark on the dancer's body. In “The Inscription of Gesture: Inward Migrations in Dance”, Ness takes the idea of “gesture as inscription” as far as possible, until it “becomes nonsense”, arguing that “it takes a while to reach that point, and the meanings revealed along the

way are as significant as they are, for the most part, overlooked” (1).¹²³ Ness argues that doing so “calls into question established theories of the relationship between corporeal performance and ephemerality” (1). In this respect, Ness endeavour echoes the one Schneider argues for when she advocates for “other modes of remembering, that might be situated ... in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently” (101). Ness thus calls for an exploration of movement as “inscribed”, that is: how it “mark[s] in a *durable* way” (3), and suggests that “we might do best to look at the mark they leave ... *upon the bodies that are their medium*” (6, italics in the original). The performers’ “anatomy provides the “sites” or “places” where gesture can leave its mark in the rendering of a “final form” – that is, in a structure that bears an enduring and permanent signifying character” (6). This durable inscription of repeated movement constitutes a form of touch that is, in the case of Escale, intimately intertwined with the company’s lifestyle and physical history.

Hollenstein and Krausse show such traces of a history of movement. In their late forties when I met them, they were both very fit and slim, their faces emaciated and prematurely wrinkled, Krausse’s lips and eyebrow bearing signs of accidents that could have been more dramatic, Hollenstein’s middle finger a worrying shape after being broken. These features echo Ness’ idea that the inscriptions of gesture have to be looked for in muscles, ligaments and even the bones of the dancer (6). The interconnection between *itinérance* and physicality in performance that lies at the core of Escale’s project is present in the very flesh

¹²³ Ness specifies that she “do[es] believe that eventually it becomes literally untrue to describe dancing in terms of gesture as inscription” (1). She thus justifies her project in these terms:

First, [the phrase] compels a close examination of the full range of semiotic capabilities evident in dancing. Second, it compels a rethinking of the relationship between the body and the unconscious, and between embodiment and “nonconsciousness”. (1)

of the company's members. In this respect, Escale's political commitment partly informed their gestural and physical vocabularies. In their case, the political becomes embodied, and the ideals that subtend the life choices made by Escale have contributed to permanently mark their bodies, occasionally making them subversive depending on the context where they perform their work.

The example of Grit Krausse best illustrates this idea, being both an aerialist and a woman. Krausse's body disrupts common perceptions of age and gender. I focus here on her work on the silk in *Est ou ouest* (2009-2014). In this show, Krausse is the only one who performs a physical score, while both Fenwick and Hollenstein operate as compères. A greater focus is therefore placed on her. In the show, Krausse is Martina K., a character who bears many biographical resemblances to Krausse herself: both are German, were born in Cuba and raised in East Berlin, both are aerialists and have a degree in biophysics. Krausse's aerial work in *Est ou ouest* crystallises a political dimension inscribed onto her movements and her physicality, echoing Peta Tait's claim that "the performance of cultural identity is part of aerial artistry" (7).

Est ou ouest

In a 5 minute long aerial solo, Krausse's character explains the reasons why she fled the GDR, and the attraction the West had for her at the time of her defection. Martina K.'s monologue is framed as happening during a talk-show, in a section of time allocated to her to convince her fellow "Socialist citizens" – the audience - to allow her to come back East after her escape. Krausse's character wants to go back after having experienced capitalism to its limits in the West. Trying to convince her fellow citizens and to avoid the acid remarks of the

compère in charge of judging her, Martina K. argues her case. However, mid-way through the show, the Berlin wall falls, and the Socialist country Martina K. was about to re-enter becomes a liberal society. After defending herself and explaining the vices of capitalist societies, it is an occasion for Martina K. – and for Krausse - to reflect on her life in GDR and to call for a re-consideration of Socialism.

Martina K. starts speaking on the ground, holding the two parts of the silk in her hands,¹²⁴ framing her face as if peering from behind a curtain. She gazes toward the sky, explaining that she “en avai[t] marre d’être enfermée”.¹²⁵ She then starts ascending the silk, wrapping one foot after the other in the red fabric and climbing it as a ladder, enunciating the names of the places she wanted to visit. She almost reaches the top but falls, letting a scream escape while wrapping her body in the silk so she is left hanging by her feet, balancing downward. She then falls even more, only retained by knots around her waist or one of her thigh. The smoothness of the scene does not completely mask the technical efforts the performer has to go through. She climbs again, only to fall down onto the floor. An “assistant” – then played by her and Hollenstein’s son, Gwennoal Hollenstein - puts her back on her feet, and gently but insistently forces her back on the silk. She climbs again, falls again, and from very high on the silk, she falls three times in a row, her body swinging and twisting while she descends from one knot to the other.

¹²⁴ *Est ou ouest* has been designed to be toured outside the marquee, and therefore without the caravans. The show has been performed outdoors on many occasions, and the silk is in these cases held by three mobile pillars that form a pyramidal shape when put together. Because of its (relatively) light apparatus, the show can be performed more flexibly, allowing *Escale* to think of it as a series of one-off rather than week-long runs.

¹²⁵ “Was tired of being locked in”.

This time, when her feet are about to touch the ground, she holds the silk in a clever arrangement of folds, and starts running in a circular motion, retained by the silk that becomes a lead and eventually allows her to run with her feet not touching the ground anymore. When she stops, she is obviously exhausted, her breath short. The assistant helps her up again. The camera catches the moment she licks her palms as to compensate for the lack of magnesia, long gone in the exercise. Her climb is this time heavier, the efforts more apparent, the “assistant” needs to push her up until his hands cannot reach her anymore. Her breath, amplified by the microphone she wears near her mouth, is almost visible, even more so since her body covered in tight Lycra allows the viewer to follow the journey of air in her lungs. She falls once more, her movements having gained more fluidity, and is stopped mid-way through her speech by the TV presenter in charge of organising Martina K.’s judgement when she expresses her desire to “dire merde à l’État, aux flics et au Parti”.¹²⁶ While the presenter interrupts her, something that is also translated in a sudden stop of the music that was accompanying her ascension, she is held mid-way in the air, retained by the silk wrapped around her waist, floating horizontally above ground, as if suspended in a freeze frame.

¹²⁶ “To tell the State, the cops, the Party to piss off”.



**Figure 4 - Grit Krausse as Martina K.
Photo by David Commenchal**

Krausse's subversive physicality.

In the show, Krausse wears the colours of the GDR, her waist wrapped in a tight red Lycra body suit with no sleeves, her legs in black trousers held by a yellow belt adorned by the symbol of GDR as a buckle. The Lycra allows her muscles to become apparent when she climbs, the high-cut top reveals wide, muscular shoulders, unshaved armpits. Krausse is in this performance literally *wearing* the East German flag, towards which the audience is supposed to be inclined, given that Martina K. is at this stage the only likeable character. In this respect, Krausse is embodying a political statement. But Krausse's body is also political in the way it questions and subverts gender stereotypes. Krausse's "un-feminine" body is not presented as a statement as such. But by her very presence, the marks of her training and of *itinérance*, and by the decisions she makes in

everyday life about her body, Krausse embodies a subversive femaleness.¹²⁷ Krausse manages to simultaneously challenge notions of femininity, age, and what Tait calls “the socially conformist female aerial identity” that has been constructed “over decades in circuses” by specific acts such as the “human butterfly” (55). The imagery still often associated with aerial acts on the silk is loaded with stereotypes of fragile and graceful femaleness, an iconography directly opposed to Krausse’s sweaty, effortful, painful performance that is made for a purpose (dramatic as much as political), and not merely as a satisfying spectacle. Krausse resembles the new circus’ “aggro femme”, who “exposes the way that bodies are socially identified according to patterns of movement so that atypical action undermines gender demarcations” (Tait 131). Krausse’s effortful aerial performance constitutes such “atypical action” in the way it goes against expectations of female aerial artistry.



Figure 5 –Krausse’s subversive aerial femininity. Photo by David Comenchal

¹²⁷ There is no doubt that Krausse is aware of her image and of the political nature of some of the choices she makes for herself.

Krausse's movements and her physicality have further implications: from a phenomenological perspective and, still following Tait's argument, Krausse's corporeality and, more importantly, her physicality in *Est ou ouest* operate as "bodily disruptions of kinetic cultural orientations" (150). Tait argues that one moves "in body schemata that are also culturally habituated by gender, ethnic and sexual identity" (149). Following Merleau-Ponty, Tait states that "if the perceptual world is constantly interpreted through a body-in-the-world", "[c]hallenges to embodied dominance might need sensory and visceral as well as ideological reconfigurations" (150). In the way she does not comply with images of femininity usually attached to female aerialists, therefore not moving according to a "schemata ... habituated by [her] gender ... identity", Krausse generates an "ideological reconfiguration" but also creates what Tait terms an "ambiguous body identity". I argue with Tait that "[a] visceral encounter with [such] ambiguous body identity bends pre-existing patterns of body-to-body (or –bodies) phenomenological exchanges and is at least potentially disruptive of hierarchical patterning" (150). Krausse also makes this "ambiguous body identity" familiar through the narrative of Martina K.'s life. The "visceral encounter" audience members experience with the performer is tinted by the political message Krausse delivers: we viscerally experience Martina K.'s distress and danger when Krausse "falls" from the skies, retained in extremis by the red silk – and perhaps even more so since Martina K. seems so similar to Krausse. Through her embodiment of a subversive physical identity, Krausse opens up this potential in audience members.

This idea that Krausse's physicality in *Est ou ouest* is subversive is corroborated if we look at it through the prism of "gesture", as Noland defines it.

Gesture is “the nodal point where culture (the imposition of bodily techniques), neurobiology (the given mechanics of a human sensorimotor apparatus), and embodied experience (the kinaesthetic experience specific to a human body) overlap and inform one another” (8). Noland argues that gesture allows humans to “both embod[y] and challenge[.]” culture “through corporeal performance” (2): how essentially gestures are both repositories of learnt behaviour that is socially constructed, and the site where such behaviours can be subverted. But what is essential to Noland’s argument is the “opportunity for *interoceptive* or kinaesthetic awareness” that gestures afford (2). Indeed, this dimension is what allows the person who gestures to “sense qualitative distinctions in tonicity” (6) because of their awareness that “cultural conditioning has been inscribed on our muscles and bones”. Noland concludes stating that “[u]ltimately, it is because we experience differentiated movement qualities in the course of performing gestures that we are inspired to alter the rhythm, sequence, and meaning of our acts” (7). This is of course even more evident in the case of a performer who, like Krausse, consciously performs specific gestures. Nevertheless, as Krausse’s effortful performance suggests, a kinaesthetic awareness of gestures she has learnt and practiced throughout her career enables her to play with rhythm, effort, and subvert the association of aerial acts with an idealised female physicality. This is made all the more relevant by the fact that Krausse’s aerial gesture depends on her knowledge of a series of movement that enables her to choreograph a specific solo, yet consists of a stock knowledge shared by all aerialists in order to stay secure and to, simply, practice the silk. In this respect, a kinaesthetic awareness of the gap between the learnt physicality these movements on the silk require, and the ones Krausse performs, is what allows

her to subvert expectations related to being a female aerialist. Krausse's aerial physicality echoes Noland's statement that "[t]here is a first time for *my* body to perform what other bodies already have learned to do. And there is a first time for *my* body to perform the gesture in an idiosyncratic and potentially subversive way" (214). The only difference here is that, being a performance, Krausse's "gestures" are not performed for the first time, but suggest instead a conscious premeditated decision on Krausse's part. It also attracts our attention to the important level of inner kinetic awareness that enables Krausse to feel and therefore subvert aerial choreography, a capacity granted by years of training and performance. The political undertones associated with Martina K., Krausse's character, and her training history, meant to have taken place in GDR, are linked to Krausse's actual training in GDR. When bearing in mind Tait's statement that circus' "anti-establishment status", inherited from the fact that "circus skills [were] long deemed working-class entertainments" and consequently sanctioned "as state entertainment by Communist governments" (126), Krausse's physicality and aerial "gestures", when joined to her defence of Socialism, bear a subversive dimension, directly inscribed onto her corporeality.

The extent to which Escale's enterprise in *Est ou ouest* was successful is however mitigated. The performance I attended, on the 24th of October 2009, was received warmly but very passively, a positioning that did not match the company's expectations. This (absence of) reaction was perhaps surprising given that the show was taking place in Tours at a venue - Projet 244 - presented as "un laboratoire des Arts de la Rue pour des creations privilégiant l'interdisciplinarité

et la transversalité des pratiques” (“Un laboratoire”).¹²⁸ The website presents “arts de la rue” as “une culture populaire”, adding that “à travers le choix de la rue, nous revendiquons l’héritage contestataire et festif d’intervention dans l’espace public de nos prédécesseurs des années 70 de l’AGIT PROP”. Thus, “la rue devient un espace commun, lieu d’expression, de rencontres et d’échanges” (“Projet culturel”).¹²⁹ The audience, supposedly familiar with the format, decided however to not partake in the participative moments intended by the company. Besides the fact that a part of the audience might have in fact disagreed with Escale’s political message and that the company might have still been experimenting with the best way to frame the show and its participative dimension, the idea that Escale’s performance provides subversive modes of experiencing theatre might in fact be contradicted by its own commodification. If agit-prop might have constituted a powerful subversive instrument in its early days, it becomes inoperative when confronted with an audience who knows its codes and is used to theatrical convention.

Finding a voice

Both Krause and Hollenstein consider that, until 2005, their shows were wordless. This is a surprising statement, for even before the company decided to focus on the relationship between movement and text, words and voices were far from absent from their work. In *R de Rien* (1995) for example, a solo piece performed by Hollenstein, the text is scarce but Hollenstein’s character speaks on

¹²⁸ “a place for testing and experimenting with Street Arts, to create work that focuses on interdisciplinarity and on transversal exchange between practices”.

¹²⁹ “a form of popular culture”, “through the choice of streets as performance spaces, we reclaim the anti-establishment and festive heritage of contestation in the public sphere, that we inherit from our AGIT-PROP predecessors of the 1970s”. “The street becomes a shared space, a place of expression, of encounters and exchanges”.

more than one occasion in a conversation with himself. Having written notes he sticks onto the door to signpost his spatial position, Hollenstein's character R discovers when reading one out loud that he is the author of said note. He exclaims: "Tu t'appelles R, tu habites avec moi. Signé: R. C'est moi!"¹³⁰ Words serve here to colour the narrative, acknowledging the de-doubling of the character; they accompany the character's physicality and justify his psychological state, not however adding a new narrative layer. *Contes à rebours*, a collaboration with Aktion Theatre that fuses physical work and storytelling, is another example of the presence of words in Escale's work before 2005. In this case, words and physicality complement each other, telling the same story through different means.

First experiments on "speaking out".

Escale see a shift in their work and their approach to movement after the 2003 Avignon festival. Hollenstein acknowledged on many occasions the significance of this date. It is for example with these words that he opens a documentary on the devising of *Des Mots derrière la vitre* (Oliveiro): "quand on était à Avignon, on a fait grève, et ça nous a donné envie de prendre la parole".¹³¹ The event prompted Escale to create a "laboratoire de travail autour du rapport de la parole et du mouvement" (Oliveiro),¹³² an experimentation that led to the creation of *Des Mots derrière la vitre* (2006). The show is a promenade performance where the audience follows a man pushing a wheelbarrow through different spaces. On the wheelbarrow are

¹³⁰ "Your name is R, you live with me. From: R. That's me!"

¹³¹ "when we were in Avignon we went on a strike, and this experience made us want to speak out."

¹³² "a laboratory for experimentations around the relationship between words and movement".

two old-fashioned speakers that amplify the sound of somebody breathing. Hollenstein describes, in the same documentary, the scenes as “îles flottantes d’intimité”,¹³³ explaining that the premise for the show came from the idea of looking out through somebody else’s window, and seeing the situations one’s neighbours are in, without yet hearing the words, only audible when one comes closer (Oliveiro).

The heavy breathing that emanates from the loudspeaker precedes the exploration of these intimacies. The amplification reverses the distinction between inside and outside, giving the breathing an overpowering quality, as if each spectator and all of them as a collective were in intimate physical proximity with the “breather”. In this case however, the breathing is produced by a machine, it is disincarnated, furthering a feeling that the breathing is at once extremely close, intimate, and foreign, distant. When inside the marquee, a performer’s breath could *touch* through evaporation, in *Des Mots derrière la vitre*, the de-ambulating breathing is fleshless.

Hollenstein analyses two distinct ways for text and movement to interfere with each other, speaking about how on some occasions “l’écriture [était] complètement imbriquée entre mouvements et mots” and on some others how texts could have “un sens très clair ... [qui] autorise le corps à des allures complètement abstraites” (Oliveiro).¹³⁴ Krausse’s solo belongs to the first category: the audience is led outdoors to where an aerialist is getting preparing for her ascension. Xavier Durringer’s text, spoken by the aerialist, seems strangely connected to her actions: as she warms up, she enumerates

¹³³ “floating islands of intimacy”.

¹³⁴ “The writing [was] totally imbricated in between words and movements”; “a very clear meaning ... [that] allowed the bodies to take on abstract movements”.

everything she has tried to feel better. Krausse's gestures echo what Hélène Harmat, in a publication on fin-de-siècle French pantomime, calls "le geste pantomimique" ("pantomimic gesture"), which operates as the "creuset où se conjuguent et s'abrasent mutuellement l'expression discursive et celle d'une irréductible corporéité" (220).¹³⁵

Jennifer Leporcher and Benoît Armange's duet shows a couple in a conversation about love. The text by Jean-Luc Godard suggests the couple is close to breaking up, but the conversation remains casual and relaxed. The performers' physicalities however express an underlying violence that is simply understated in the text. In this case, the relationship between words and movement is one of tension, as the latter expresses what the former does not. This tension is however also a reciprocal relationship: words and movements colour each other so as to create a total meaning, emerging from what tongues say, under the decorum of sociality, and what the bodies express about the way these characters treat each other, about the *gut feelings* the characters are experiencing as an undercurrent.

Fragmentation of Escale's voices: the disappointment of *Façades*.

The experimentations of *Des Mots...* directly led to *Façades* (2008). The company's collaboration with Sonia Chiambretto was designed to generate a text written for movement. The project proved more difficult than expected with many tensions arising amongst company members, and with the fact that Chiambretto's text was eventually a source of discontentment. In an informal

¹³⁵ "The melting-pot into which a discursive expression and irreducible corporeality rub and are conjugated with each other."

conversation with Krausse and Hollenstein, Hollenstein mentioned the difficulty of working with a text written for physical theatre, and regretted the “cut and paste” quality of *Façades*.¹³⁶ Why did the text not fit the performance’s physicality, while previous experimentations had proven successful? And how does this unsuitability of the text undermine the political discourse at the core of *Façades*? As I have previously noted, the show is potentially subversive in the way it seemingly suggests an opposition to dominant perceptions of home and freedom. It does so by suggesting for the audience a visceral experience of the coercive nature of “walls”, in an environment defined by its apparent absence of walls. The text however did not achieve a similar aim, certainly because of its fragmented quality. The performers’ voices seemed lost amongst their movements, and the textual fragmentation led to a homogenisation of the performers’ individuality. All wore similar looking beige and cream costumes, and the words said by one could have equally been said by another. In this regard, the performers’ *personae* operated like what French critic Jean-Pierre Ryngaert theorises as “personages-fantômes”, “phantom-characters”, which he sees as a common feature of much contemporary playwriting in the 2000s.¹³⁷ Ryngaert defines them as “porte-voix” (156), literally “the ones who carry the voice”. Words are not embodied, do not reflect any specific subjectivity: they speak for someone but through the voices of several others. Words are projected onto the moving bodies more than they are embodied. Escale’s project failed because the text bore more similarities to what Paola Didong (13) identifies as a tendency in contemporary French theatre to get rid of the characters to “écarter

¹³⁶ Béatrice Bossard in *La Nouvelle République de Blois* mentions how the show is “[h]aché par un texte trop souvent hermétique”. (“Broken off by a text on many occasions too hermetic”)

¹³⁷ This is certainly the case of a lot of French playwrights, but can also be found in the work of Martin Crimp, most prominently in *Attempts on Her Life* (2000), or in most of Sarah Kane’s later plays.

les entraves qui gênent l’envol du texte”.¹³⁸ The performers moved uttering alien words, as opposed to portraying holistic subjectivities in movement, as in *Des Mots derrière la vitre*. This quality of the text is not exceptional in the French context, and Chiambretto’s approach to playwriting highlights how Escale’s “physical theatres” are minority. In this very specific context, their potentially subversive physicality was let down by the inoperative nature of a text that could not be embodied.

Voice as embodiment

In the continuity of *Des Mots...* and *Façades*, *Est ou ouest* fuses words with high physicality to explore a political message. It however constitutes a turning point in the company’s aesthetics: the show is presented as “théâtre d’agit-prop” (“Est ou ouest”), and Escale consider that it differs from their usual “physical” style. *Est ou ouest* was created very shortly after Escale decided to abandon the project of touring *Façades*. Escale’s move toward “agit-prop” theatre is coherent with their previous work: it is inscribed in the company’s desire to “speak out”, this time, in a very literal sense. Sophie Herr’s work on voice, developed in her short but incredibly inspirational essay *Geste de la voix et théâtre du corps* (2009) proves useful in analysing the shift from (silent) physicality to embodied voices in Escale’s artistic trajectory. Herr considers the body as “un moule dynamique et élastique, ... qui marque la voix de son empreinte”, a mould that also “se modèle lui-même au passage du souffle”

¹³⁸ “to get rid of any barrier that impedes the presence of the text”.

(33).¹³⁹ Herr sees physicality in the presence on stage of spoken voices, as they are generated by what she defines as “gestes vocaux”: “vocal gestures” that are simultaneously “interne” (“internal”) and “visible”. These gestures connect the “audible body” and the “visible” one (35) and affirm the presence of the performer. In *Est ou ouest*, Escale’s physicality has shifted and is also situated in the performers’ voices, even more so when one considers Herr’s assertion, after philosopher Danièle Cohen-Levinas, that “vocal gestures” are, as much as physical gestures, “lié[es] à une conduite corporelle, ...au carrefour du biologique et du culturel”.¹⁴⁰ Escale’s voices on stage are therefore continuations of their “physical theatres”: in this way, Escale locate their “théâtre en mouvement” within their voice, thus displacing physicality and enabling a renewed understanding of corporeal intimacy.

Conclusive remarks

Escale, as a travelling theatre company, is primarily defined by *itinérance*. The company’s mobile spaces allow them to devise work that they see as coherent with their lifestyle and their artistic and political agendas. *Itinérance* and Escale’s potential for subversion are inscribed on the company members’ physicality, and make their corporealities and the gestures they perform sites for contestation. Finally, Escale has grown so as to feel the need to speak up and to create shows with a political message, in a way that questions the relationship between movement and spoken language. The fact that Escale have decided to make shows with a far-left political content is not without its

¹³⁹ “an elastic and dynamic mould, ... which imprints its mark on voice”, is self-modelled by the journey of air through the body”.

¹⁴⁰ “linked to a specific corporeal behaviour, ... at the cross-road between biological and cultural influences”.

paradoxes, given the company's reliance on institutional funding. In this respect, Escale's mobility is paradoxically part of a "sedentarist metaphysics", as are the topics of their most political shows. Cresswell argues that in "classic migration theory", which he sees as partaking in a "sedentarist metaphysics", "[p]eople move because they have come to the rational decision that one place is better ... than another" (29), rather than because of the journey between the two locations. Both *Façades* and *Est ou ouest* emphasise an idea of mobility as a means of leaving one place, as in *Façades*, or returning to one place, as in *Est ou ouest*. In this respect, the company's compliance with a "sedentarist metaphysics" undermines the radical potential of their message. Place is represented through movement, but in a way that does not challenge embodied experiences of place as rooted, immutable and stable. In this respect, they further perceptions that Cresswell after Malkki argues "reaffirm and enable the commonsense segmentation of the world into ... nations, states, countries, and places" (27), a practice that has devastating consequences for mobile communities, and does little to upset audience's perception of place as property and belonging.

If Escale's aesthetic and thematic choices are not particularly novel but draw instead on circus, street performance and agit-prop theatre, and are inscribed in a "sedentarist metaphysics", they are however presented as alternative, and often perceived as such by commentators. The first reason for this lies in the fact that, performing their work in France, they are included in networks that operate outside of theatre buildings, but also possibly because they concentrate on using movement before, simultaneously, or instead of text, as the disappointment of *Façades* highlighted.

Movement underlies Escale's work, but also Escale's lifestyle; in this respect, it challenges distinctions between notions of openness and closure. The fact that their living and performing spaces are mobile contributes to making them appear as an illustration of the freedom that supposedly comes with mobility – a perception clearly oblivious of the labour and duress that a life on the road presupposes. On the other hand, it also contributes to representing an existence coherent with one's political ideals, in line with the longstanding association of street performance with what Haedicke has called “a history of protest ... in public spaces” (163). I have highlighted how Escale's position as radical outsiders needed to be balanced against their reliance on state funding. If not their work or their relationship to the state, their *itinérance* on the other hand remains potentially subversive, primarily in the way the tent provides a theatre space that redesigns boundaries of intimacy. The tent, epitome of the company's *itinérance*, is characterised by the fluidity and porosity of its frontiers, themselves ephemeral and mobile. It allows for a theatrical experience that redefines boundaries between intimate spaces and an experience of the collective.

Movement also suggests an alternative way of making theatre, with a decision by the company to focus on high physicality and, until recently, very few words, as a counter-current to the main tendency in the French context. This is an idea that continues to fuel the company's endeavours. At the time of the fieldwork, Hollenstein had acknowledged his decision to concentrate on directing more often than on performing as influenced by ageing. Whilst Krause's aerial performance directly contradicts this idea that athletic bodies need to be young bodies, the passing of time has influenced Escale's decision to

settle down, and in parallel, to produce work where words play a central part. If one day the heightened physical vocabularies, and the geographical mobility that support Escale's lifestyle cannot be effective anymore, it will be necessary to find another support.¹⁴¹ Moving their message from athletic and mostly silent physicality to work where words and movement complete each other constitutes one step in this direction.

I argue that the underlying presence of movement in all aspects of Escale's existence generates alternative, and occasionally subversive, ways of collaborating and of making theatre, not least for the way it questions notions of authorship and individuality. Escale's recent decision to work with words and texts, which the company acknowledges as emanating from a need to "speak out", can also be seen as reconnecting them with the wider French theatrical culture where text is still very much a concern for both practitioners and commentators. By putting these texts "en mouvement" through their theatre "du mouvement" and thus coining "physical theatres", Escale propose embodied ways of experiencing performance, and *itinérance*, that are alternative – if not subversive - in the French context.

¹⁴¹ Hollenstein mentioned then the possibility of working with puppets, which he sees as a means to embody movement differently. Since I conducted this fieldwork, Escale has produced a show with puppets, *D'Un souffle tu chavires* (2013).

CHAPTER 4:

“ÊTRE ET PENSER POUR DISPARAÎTRE”: POETICS OF MOVEMENT IN THE THEATRE OF JEAN LAMBERT-WILD

Jean Lambert-wild does not identify with being what the French call *un homme de théâtre*, literally: a man of the theatre. The expression describes artists dedicated to making, writing, performing and directing theatre. Whilst these activities are all a part of Lambert-wild's project, he actively rejects such a designation. For Lambert-wild does not believe it is his responsibility to label himself or his work: in his words, “se définir, c'est ligoter l'infini” (*Se Tenir debout* 28).¹⁴² Instead, he succinctly encapsulates: “La seule chose que je puisse dire, c'est que je suis le fils de mon père et de ma mère” (26).¹⁴³ If it does not define him, theatre is nonetheless at the very core of Lambert-wild's public life and artistic work. It is, in critic Jean-Pierre Han's words, “the only place in the world where he could exist” (Han 30). This realisation supposedly came to him as an epiphany, which Lambert-wild claims he experienced like a curse he could not escape (*Se Tenir debout* 27-28). Lambert-wild does not construct his oeuvre as an expression of his artist's singularity; instead, he considers that, since he does not hold the key to who he is, his work might be how, and where, he could find it. In his own words: “je vis le théâtre comme la demeure de mon education”

¹⁴² “To define oneself is tying infinity down”.

¹⁴³ “The only thing that I can say, is that I am the son of my father and my mother”.

(28).¹⁴⁴ These remarks are essential to an understanding of Lambert-wild's poetics: his artistic work, his function as director of a Centre Dramatique National, his activity as a writer and his social persona all partake in the same project that subtends his aesthetics.

Jean Lambert-wild is also a very prolific artist: he and his collaborators develop several major productions every year, which he directs, co-devises and occasionally performs in. Lambert-wild is also artistic director of La Comédie de Caen, Centre Dramatique National de Normandie. This position confers him a much wider visibility than the one granted to Escale, and since the duties of a CDN artistic director also include presenting one's own work, Lambert-wild benefits from a visible platform.¹⁴⁵ Whilst obviously not reducible to this, the fact that Lambert-wild is also a profuse writer and that all of the productions he co-authors are surrounded by a plethora of texts (artistic statements, presentations, interviews, poems) might contribute to granting him a greater visibility, in a theatrical context that continues to value the figure of the theatre-maker as an intellectual (Murray *Lecoq* 56), as I noted in the Introduction to this thesis. While not all of the productions he initiates are a part of it, a project of epic proportions subtends Lambert-wild's work. Lambert-wild intends to build his "Hypogée": a self-acknowledged fantasised autobiography composed of "trois Épopées, trois Mélopées, trois Confessions ... deux Exclusions (qui ont été réalisées mais qui sont cachées), un Dithyrambe et trois cent vingt-six Calentures" (Lambert-wild, *Dossier de production* 11).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ "I experience theatre as a home for my education".

¹⁴⁵ Footage, photographs and documentation for most of Lambert-wild et al.'s production are available on the Comédie de Caen website: <www.comediedecaen.fr>

¹⁴⁶ "Three Epics, three Melopoeia, three Confessions ... two Exclusions (that have been realised but are hidden), one Panegyric and three hundred and twenty six Calentures".

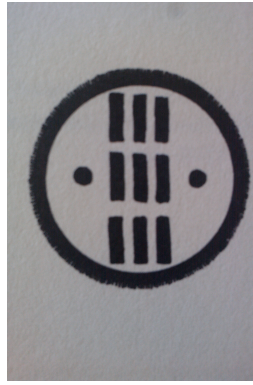


Figure 6 - L'Hypogée. (*Se Tenir debout*)

The nine bars represent the three Épopées, three Mélopées and three Confessions; the dots represent the two Exclusions; the circle is composed of 326 bars juxtaposed, each one representing a Calenture.

All productions but the “Calentures” are described as “Ecmnésies”, pieces made for the theatre. The “Calentures” often take the form of durational or short pieces of performance art that happen outside of theatres, and many of them feature the stripped-pyjamas “clown” that Lambert-wild presents as his alter ego.¹⁴⁷ The word “calenture” is a maritime term, which refers to “[le] délire furieux auquel les marins sont sujets lors de la traversée de la zone tropicale et qui est caractérisé par des hallucinations et le désir irrépressible de se jeter à la mer” (*Se Tenir debout* 13).¹⁴⁸ This nautical terminology is a key element of Lambert-wild’s rhetoric, who organised his former company, the Coopérative 326, prior to his nomination as director of the Comédie de Caen, following the code of practice of the Merchant Navy (*Se Tenir debout* 61). It is no accident either that Lambert-wild will only be seen wearing the same tailor-made outfit every day of the year, a uniform itself inspired from mariners’. These

¹⁴⁷ A list of all the Calentures that have been realised and the ones that remain to be done, along with video and photographic documentation, is available at <http://www.comediedecaen.com/web/calentures-94.html>.

¹⁴⁸ “The raging delirium that affects mariners when crossing the tropical zone. It is characterised by hallucinations and an irrepressible desire to throw oneself at sea.”

characteristics allegedly refer back to when Lambert-wild, as an adolescent, escaped his natal La Réunion enrolling on a boat... or so the legend has it (Han 23-24). The word “Ecmnésie” is borrowed from psychology, where it is used to describe the experience of living one’s memories as if they were happening again: what Lambert-wild sees as “l’évocation hallucinatoire de tranches du passé” (“L’Ecmnésie”),¹⁴⁹ an idea that emphasises the dream-like quality of many of his staged work. As for the term “Hypogée”, it is rather ambiguous: Lambert-wild uses it as feminine, while the French term is a masculine noun that, in archaeology, designates an underground funeral room.¹⁵⁰ It is no accident that it should have been chosen to define Lambert-wild’s enterprise to contain the factual and fantasised aspects of one man’s life into a project of both visible and invisible ramifications. As this brief presentation suggests, Lambert-wild’s is an “autobiographie fantasmée”, where dreams and phantoms are given as much materiality and credit as the factual elements of one’s life.

The man is also known for his ability to find trustworthy and sometimes surprising collaborators: he has worked with experimental magician Thierry Collet; Jérôme Thomas, the juggler who redefined the genre; world-renowned choreographer Carolyn Carlson; and the high-profile, media-conscious French philosopher Michel Onfray. To paraphrase Lambert-wild: one does not fly to the moon on one’s own, one needs the constant assistance of others, “une communauté d’hommes” (“Interview” War Sweet War).¹⁵¹ It is the addition of the capabilities and skills of all participants that allows one to produce one’s oeuvre. Furthermore, collaborations should not be provoked: Lambert-wild argues that they should happen if they *have to*, that is to say, if it is the right time

¹⁴⁹ “The hallucinatory evocation of layers of the past.”

¹⁵⁰ Nouns in French are gendered.

¹⁵¹ “A community of human beings”.

for all participants: “si c’est pas le bon moment, les choses ne peuvent pas se faire” (“Personal Interview” 2011).¹⁵² On several occasions, he has chosen performers from very different backgrounds, interested in the individuals’ personal histories and in what their presence could communicate on stage: this is the case for example of the work he did with Odile Sankara - sister of Burkinabe revolutionary political leader Thomas Sankara – three technically light productions aimed to tour villages in Africa.¹⁵³ As I mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, I choose to acknowledge the inherently collaborative nature of the work initiated by Lambert-wild by adding to his name “-et al.” when referring to the shows he initiate but is not the sole author of.

Jean Lambert-wild et al.’s theatre is characterised by the precise and careful agency of different mediums that all concur to creating a unique theatre experience. The work blurs generic boundaries and often mixes high technology with live physical performance. In this respect, the productions initiated by Lambert-wild enter the category of “intermedial” performances which Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt define in their introduction to *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* as “associated with the blurring of generic boundaries, crossover and hybrid performances, ... intermediality, hypermediality and a self-conscious reflexivity that displays the devices of performance in performance” (11). The “intermedial” quality of Lambert-wild et al.’s work is also illustrated by collaborations with physical performers: mime artists, dancers and

¹⁵²“If it’s not the right time, things can’t happen anyway”. It is a similar attitude that I believe informed Lambert-wild’s position towards me during my second stay in Caen, as I highlighted in the Introduction.

¹⁵³ As suggested by these productions, *Nous Verrons bien* (2005), *À Corps perdu* (2007) and *Rououa ou le peuple des rois* (2009), not all shows initiated by Lambert-wild have a place in his *Hypogée*. Such paradox – one’s insistence on inscribing one’s work into a wider project combined with the inadequacy of some productions with the overall aim – epitomises Lambert-wild’s ethics: a prolific and ambitious production of work that nonetheless acknowledges its inherent discrepancies and allows self-referential humorous criticism.

choreographers, who all brought new performative textures to his theatre work and sometimes confused commentators who attempted to classify his productions, as I will develop in this chapter. Lambert-wild's interest in intermediality lies in the belief that theatre should adopt contemporary means of narration, whilst subverting them:

It is important to always question what will be the narrative systems specific to theatre, in the environment where it is located ... What is certain is that it is not possible to speak about the world, to represent it and to question it critically and dialectically by adapting modes of representation that were already in use fifty years ago! ("Interview" War Sweet War)

I have opened this thesis with an example borrowed from Lambert-wild et al.'s *La Mort d'Adam*. What the scene suggested is that despite a general impression of dynamic activity, each element of the *mise-en-scène*, and especially the score of the physical performer, was, when itemised, characterised by the minimal and microscopic quality of the movement. This microscopic quality does not mean movement is absent, but rather, that it is understood differently. Indeed, movement is at the very core of Lambert-wild et al.'s enterprise, and subtends Lambert-wild's philosophy of theatre. He identifies two sorts of movement that contradict one another: the one, internal, that takes place inside one's organism, and that rubs against the "mouvement extérieur" of the (Western, capitalist) world. "Si nous voulons vivre, nous devons donc être à l'écoute de deux mouvements contradictoires dont les affrontements sont

violents, quotidiens et indéchiffrables” (*Se Tenir debout* 21). In this context, one should aim to “être et penser pour disparaître”: to be and to think so as to disappear, to follow one’s movement that inexorably takes one to the grave, and to train oneself to “assouplir cette ultime crampe qu’est la mort” (22).¹⁵⁴ Since, in Lambert-wild’s perspective, theatre equates with one’s life project, it is also in the theatre that such “assouplissement” should take place.

In the same way that collaborations happen when it is the right time for them to happen, styles and genres of performance are used according to the needs of the show. Several productions other than *La Mort d’Adam* are constituted of a heightened physical score: the first “Ecmnésie” documented on the Comédie de Caen’s website, *Splendeur et lassitude du Capitaine Marion Déperrier* (1998),¹⁵⁵ was described by Lambert-wild as “extrêmement physique” (“Personal Interview” 2010).¹⁵⁶ Several later shows include a heightened physical score, *Le Recours aux forêts* (2009) for example is constructed around the performance of dancer Juha Marsalo, and *Comment ai-je pu tenir là-dedans* (2010), an adaptation of Alphonse Daudet’s *La Chèvre de Monsieur Seguin* around physical performer Silke Mansholt. An important shift in Lambert-wild’s theatrical aesthetics took place in 2001, when he met composer Jean-Luc Therminarias, with whom he still collaborates. Therminarias’ compositions incorporate a subtle work on voice, often mixed live during the performance. The microphones used to capture the performers’ voice, introduced in *Orgia* (2001), and present throughout Lambert-wild et al.’s repertoire, often require a relative

¹⁵⁴ “If we want to live, we need to be aware of these two contradictory movements whose confrontations are violent, daily and indecipherable”; “to loosen the ultimate cramp that is death”.

¹⁵⁵ *Splendeur et lassitude...* is not Lambert-wild’s first production, which was *Grande Lessive de printemps* (1990). However, it is his first “Épopée”, and first collaboration with what Lambert-wild calls a Néphélyn – a concept I will return to later in this chapter.

¹⁵⁶ “Extremely physical”.

stillness from the performers who use them. A section of this chapter is dedicated to analysing such a shift towards an aesthetic composed of what Lambert-wild calls “micro-mouvements”, and to illuminating the formal and philosophical consequences of such a shift.

An analysis of Escale’s work could not stand without a brief overview of the effects that *itinérance* had had on their devising processes and their aesthetics. Exploring Lambert-wild et al.’s work on the other hand supposes shifting towards examining a poetics; this is justified by the fact that, for Lambert-wild, a poetic reading of the world constitutes both an epistemology and a political endeavour in its own right (*Se Tenir debout* 20). In the following chapter, I explore how Lambert-wild et al.’s “physical theatres”, with their focus on intermediality and on combining “micro-movement” with heightened physical scores, disrupt boundaries between the spaces of the theatre. I also examine how the inherent multi-disciplinarity of these works constitutes a challenge to the French context, partly due to the fact that Lambert-wild et al.’s work falls into the category of “physical theatres” for which, we have seen, there exists no equivalent terminology in the French language. In a second section, I consider “micro-movement” and voice as physical practices that constitute an alternative theatrical experience and redefine notions of tactility. I close this chapter analysing how these participate in the creation of a poetics of disappearance that in turn coins novel codes of narration and representation, whilst questioning notions of unity, intimacy, the collective and the individual, breaking down boundaries between “inner” and “outer” realms.

The hypermedial “physical theatres” of Jean Lambert-wild et al.

Porous spaces

The theatre of Jean Lambert-wild et al. illustrates exactly Chamberlain’s definition of “post-physical performance”, which informed my definition of “physical theatres”, in the way it “implies the suspension” of “generic expectations”, including “unexpected hybrids” and multimedia theatre (121). I also suggested, in the Introduction to this thesis, that there lacked a terminology in the French language to speak about “physical theatres”, which made it difficult to categorise this type of work in the French theatrical context. In this respect, Lambert-wild et al.’s “physical theatres” represent a challenge to the French context, for the way they disturb generic expectations and suggest alternative ways of making and experiencing theatre, with textual and physical scores constituting one of the multiple strata that compose the piece. These scores are part of a multidimensional work of art in which mediums are equally weighted and represent different voices that, when combined together, shape a very specific theatrical experience.

Le Recours aux forêts (2009) illustrates these specificities. It is the fruit of the collaboration between Jean Lambert-wild, Jean-Luc Therminarias, Carolyn Carlson and Michel Onfray, amongst others. Stage left, a chorus of four actors enunciates the text written by Onfray: an evocation of the Greek philosopher Democritus’ decision to take distance from the human realm by relegating himself to a shack in complete solitude. The show’s title evokes, as explained on the back cover of Onfray’s text, “ce mouvement de repli sur son âme dans un monde detestable” (*Le Recours* back cover).¹⁵⁷ In the first part of

¹⁵⁷ “this movement of withdrawal into one’s soul, in a world that is appalling”.

the show, titled “Permanence de l’apocalypse” (11),¹⁵⁸ the chorus lists atrocities and calamities provoked by human beings. Juha Marsalo is Onfray’s Democritus, “le Rebelle”, in a choreography that echoes the content of the text, translating it into “a form of corporeal poetry that is often symbolic” (Marsalo, “Interview”). Marsalo runs, screams, tears off his clothes and, naked, rolls into the water that inundates the stage, then into gravel, covering his skin with a second, animal-like, envelope, in a “metaphor” (Foster *Reading Dancing* 2) of freedom.¹⁵⁹ Marsalo is moving across a set composed of a shallow pool of opaque white-coloured water, amidst clouds and trees given materiality and depth by the 3D technology spectators experience using appropriate glasses.¹⁶⁰

The show opens with images of clouds running fast across a blue sky, projected onto what seems to be a screen the width of the stage. The sky is reflected in the water that covers the stage, a wrinkled ground that operates like a large mirror. A silhouette is drawn against the backdrop of the sky, balanced on a brick. At first seemingly still, the silhouette starts to move: first, two arms grow out of it and a moment later, a head arises. It is clear now that the silhouette is human, and that it is *actual*, as opposed to the sky, whose artificiality is emphasised by its own presence on stage – an open blue sky, visible inside a darkened closed room. The sky and its clouds are seen through 3D glasses, which confer the landscape a dimension of depth and materiality that the silhouette, still only a shadow, seems deprived of. Thus, whilst the artificiality of the sky is

¹⁵⁸ “permanence of the apocalypse”.

¹⁵⁹ Which Foster describes as when movement is in “analogy to the world, ... the dancer’s body is likewise seen as analogous to his or her sense of self, and subject.” (2)

¹⁶⁰ In one of our early discussions, Lambert-wild, reviewing the evolution of his technological experimentations, mentioned his decision to use 3D imagery as a groundbreaking device in theatre – to my knowledge, this show was the first one of its kind in France. He evoked the urgency of working with 3D, so as to do it before “que Cameron nous fasse le coup!”: before James Cameron’s *Avatar*. Amusingly, *Avatar* was indeed released in France in December 2009, while *Le Recours aux forêts* premiered a month before.

underlined, it seems more actual than the dancer. It is a similar effect that is produced later on in the piece, when Marsalo dances amongst trees – or rather, in front of 3D images of trees. In this case, because the branches and the dancer’s body appear as darkened silhouettes against the backdrop of a burning sky, their qualities mingle and merge: they both appear as flat silhouettes.



Figure 7 - Juha Marsalo in *Le Recours aux forêts*. Photo by Tristan Jeanne-Valès

These examples illustrate how, in a show like *Le Recours aux forêts*, Lambert-wild and his collaborators challenge boundaries of space, questioning ideas of finitude and enclosure. Such effects are produced by the combination of the heightened choreography displayed by Marsalo alongside the several other medial layers that constitute the performance. It is in this tension between Marsalo’s live, *palpable* physicality, and the intermedial setting, that the spaces of the theatre blur, contaminating by extension boundaries between the inside and the outside. In an article titled “Mise en scene, Hypermediacy and the Sensorium”, Andy Lavender uses a phenomenological perspective to examine what, for audiences, generates pleasure in intermedial performances. Lavender

argues that it is the point of friction between the recognition by audiences of the actual and virtual qualities of a performance. In his article, Lavender draws on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's definitions of "immediacy" and "hypermediacy", as they develop in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, but expands them to include live performance, an area almost completely ignored by Bolter and Grusin.¹⁶¹ What Bolter and Grusin analyse as specific to all forms of immediacy is "the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents" (30). Lavender adds that immediacy suggests a direct relationship between spectators and what is happening on stage, along with "a unified visual space" (55). "Hypermediacy", what Bolter and Grusin analyse as being the condition in "new media" for immediacy (6), is characterised by the way it "expresses the tension between regarding a visual space as mediatised and as a "real" space that lies beyond mediation" (41).

"Hypermediacy" presents a heterogeneous space, opening "representations of other media" and "multiply[ing] the signs of mediation" (Lavender 55). Lavender pushes Bolter and Grusin's idea further and argues that immediacy and hypermediacy are often encountered simultaneously, the latter "producing an awareness of the constructed nature of the artwork and the presence of the media in play" (56). The example of Marsalo who becomes a two-dimensional silhouette weaving through three-dimensional images of trees perfectly illustrates Lavender's point that pleasure is generated "at the point of the interface between the live and mediatised, at the moment of (re)presentation, where the thing that is conjured evokes unreachable contingencies that are outside the room ... and its own material manifestation before us" (65). The

¹⁶¹ An omission also noted by Chapple and Kattenbelt, in their introduction to *Intermediality and Performance* (14).

pleasure generated by Marsalo's heightened choreography is doubled by the fact that his body is seemingly virtual, while the virtual elements of the performance – the trees – appear to be actual. The relevance of analysing these points of friction between immediacy and hypermediacy – the impression that both moving body and immobile trees appear in one space, in one time, combined with the acknowledgement of the artifice at work – is that they disrupt notions of space in theatre.

Marsalo's physicality, embedded in a hypermedial setting, challenges what McAuley terms the "presentational" and "fictional" spaces, both off and on stage (29). The trees belong to the "presentational" space, as does the sky projected on the screen. However, the use of 3D imagery and the presence of water on the floor create a tension both acknowledged and hidden: is the sky, projected as a three-dimensional image on stage, an "on" or "off stage fictional space"? The water, offering a mirror to the sky, multiplies it: which sky is more *actual* than the other? The one projected onto the screen, which has depth and three-dimensional clouds, or its perfect reflection onto the water, clearly an image, yet, unlike the other one, palpable and subject to changes, as when Marsalo, dropping a brick in the pool, blurs the perfect sky underneath his feet? Whilst it is evident that neither the sky, the clouds, nor the trees, are, in fact, present in the room, the 3D imagery grants them depth and materiality: distinctions between the spaces at work in the theatre merge and become porous. Lambert-wild et al. bring the sky and daylight indoors, and thus reverse the outside into the inside.

Whereas Escale, defined by their *itinérance*, challenge notions of inside and outside in the way they use the tent as a membrane that is neither outdoors

nor indoors, Lambert-wild et al. rarely leave the space of the theatre. The more intermedial the work is, the heavier the technical requirements are, and this presupposes that the theatre buildings in which a show like *Le Recours aux forêts* can be staged need to be spacious and adequately equipped. This supposes that place is in this sense fully inhabited, but becomes porous under the pressure of the layering of mediums and the constant pulse of images. In this respect, Lambert-wild et al. seemingly comply with a “metaphysics of sedentarism”, to use Cresswell’s paradigm. This is however counterbalanced by the capacity of Lambert-wild et al.’s theatre to make spatial boundaries porous, reversible. The Rebel is, thematically, anachoristic, which Cresswell defines as “out of place or without a place entirely” (55). He is the one who extracted himself from society and exiled himself into the woods. When he finally reaches a stage where he is at peace with nature, and with himself, this is epitomised by his nudity.



Figure 8 - Juha Marsalo as Le Rebelle. Photo by Tristan Jeanne-Valès.

Paint has been injected into the water, giving it a painting-like quality.

His position in relation to place is echoed by the hybrid and protean nature of the spaces at work in the piece: they subvert the “metaphysics of sedentarism” that see the theatre as an immobile space. Instead, these spaces participate in a “metaphysics of nomadism” (55), transforming the theatre into a dynamic building, activated by the movement, not only of the people who make or attend the performance, but also by the constant flux of spaces that are superimposed onto one another. This is not only caused by the succession of images, but also on a tactile level: the second part opens in utter darkness and silence; audience members are invited to remove their glasses. A minute passes, and the temperature of the room gets distinctively colder; the murmur of dripping water can be heard, resonating as in a cave. As light progressively regains the stage, one can feel on one’s skin the freshness of a thousand droplets of water, as if surrounded by mist. In this case, a sense of place is conveyed through other sensorial stimuli as one experiences the nomadic nature of these spaces, which in turn perturbs the sedentary dimension of the theatre building.

Ekphrasis

These hypermedial characteristics contribute to disrupting the spaces of the theatre by making them appear as porous. Similarly, as I evoked in the Introduction to this thesis, the footage of McDonald wandering through the forests of La Réunion vividly superimposes “off stage fictional” places that, by their mere presence on the stage as projections, become “on stage fictional” places. Lambert-wild et al.’s use of a hypermedial setting suggests a redefinition of one’s experience of theatre: inter- and hypermediality are used to coin modes of narration that are coherent with this specific time and place in history. This is

particularly striking in *La Mort d'Adam*. The show is constructed like a reversed palimpsest: several layers of information simultaneously offer different yet matching narrative lines. Mediums and narratives are superimposed, but unlike a palimpsest, they complement rather than erase one another. This quality requires the audience to *surrender*. To enjoy the show, one can decide to follow an element of information, or to accept to not “read” linearly the narrative and envision it instead in an encompassing way.

The show is composed of three simultaneous layers of narration. On stage, McDonald is dressed in striped pyjamas, leather sandals and his head is shaved. Another layer of narration is added as between the stage and the audience, one can distinguish a screen made of transparent gauze onto which a film is projected. In the film the same character as the one we see onstage appears; however, he is blindfolded and guided through the Réunion’s apocalyptic landscapes by a child. Stage right, in an adorned armchair, an actress, Bénédicte Debilly, speaks the script written by Lambert-wild: a text that does not follow the same narrative arch as the one developed by the two other mediums, but that generates correspondences and parallels between them instead. The superimposition of varying means of narration blurs the different spaces at work in the theatre. Boundaries become porous, the actual stage space collides with the spaces presented in the film. McAuley’s “presentational” and “fictional” spaces – the stage, including the screen, and the places evoked on stage by the projections and the way they are intertwined with both McDonald’s physical score and Debilly’s evocations - are, in this case, very literally superimposed onto each other, offering the emergence of, whilst not exactly a third space, a

density of spaces and places processed by the spectators as distinct yet intertwined.



Figure 9 - *La Mort d'Adam*. Photo by Tristan Jeanne-Valès

In an exploration of cases of *ekphrasis* in cinema, Ágnes Pethő analyses the relationship between intermediality – arguing that cinema is, by default, an intermedial discipline – and what she terms an “ekphrastic impulse”: “a tendency to challenge cinema’s conventionally established perceptive frames” (212). Pethő’s perspective is particularly fitting for an analysis of *La Mort d’Adam*, since the show itself contains a film. As much as the “ekphrastic impulse” challenges frames of cinema, so does it disrupt “perceptive frames” of theatre here. “Ekphrasis” is a term borrowed from literary criticism that designates “the urge of an artist working in the medium of language ... to use linguistic expressivity as a “tactile” or visual sense and thus cross over into the domains of the visible” (212). In other words, an ekphrasis is the attempt to scripturally transcribe an artwork executed in another medium, whilst paying attention to the sensorial qualities of such artwork. Pethő underlines that, as such, an ekphrasis “requires the perception of intermedial relations, as “transformative inscription

or figurations” of mediality” in the work (213). *La Mort d’Adam* falls under this latter category: the intermedial relations at work are “figurations of mediality”, they are exposed and played upon. They are present in the imagery used in the text to depict the pictural splendour of the landscapes, imagery echoed by the footage projected onto the screen. When McDonald lies on the floor in a foetus-like position, the footage shows an encounter in an old cemetery between the blindfolded “clown”, played by McDonald, and a Psychopomp: a Hermes-like creature who tortures the clown.¹⁶² When the camera stops on the Psychopomp’s eye, red petals fall from the ceiling of the stage space onto McDonald. The petals look like fragile crimson tears falling from the Psychopomp’s eye, and the accompanying filmed image superimposed at this moment turns into blood-coloured waves that wash over McDonald’s immobile body.¹⁶³ The “conventional perceptive frames” of theatre are questioned and challenged: the tactile dimension of actual petals echoes those of virtual waves, the “painterly setting “erases” the medium of language, ... the ... narrative erases the medium of the (poetic) image” (Pethő 216). As such, “the *sensual presence* of things doubled with the *absence* of the physical reality that the image [and the text] represents, ... keep[s] the relationship between signifier and signified infinitely open, making the cinematic image” and here, the theatrical representation, “reach beyond its own media boundaries and into the domain of the unnameable” (219). The tension at work between the acknowledgement of the different mediums, which was, in Lavender’s terms, the cause for spectators’ phenomenological involvement with live hypermedial performance, is found here again. The idea

¹⁶² A psychopomp is, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “a conductor of souls to the afterworld”.

¹⁶³ I am grateful to Lambert-wild for pointing out these details during a rehearsal of *La Mort d’Adam*.

that *La Mort d'Adam* constitutes an example of “ekphrastic impulse” echoes Lambert-wild’s claim that it constitutes one of the “ecmnésies”: “the hallucinatory evocation of layers of the past”. This “evocation” is necessarily synaesthetic as the simultaneous co-existence of different textures and “presentational” and “fictional” spaces. It requires a vertical reading, an in-depth understanding of the show – in the very literal meaning of looking through the density of narrative layers without following a specific one in a linear way. In doing so, *La Mort d'Adam* challenges ways of generating narratives, and proposes to experience theatre in a way that is embodied.

An exploration of *War Sweet War*

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Lambert-wild et al.’s “physical theatres” are not solely intermedial for the way they use technology. In Chapple and Kattenbelt’s words, “[a]lthough at first sight, intermediality might appear to be ... technologically driven ... it actually operates, at times, without any technology being present” (12). In this respect: “[i]ntermediality is about changes in theatre practice and thus about changing perceptions of performance, which become visible through the process of staging” (12). The intermedial quality of Lambert-wild et al.’s theatre is especially effective in “changing perceptions of performance” in the way they include physical vocabularies, a dimension that is still often perceived in the French context as an unusual one. *War Sweet War*, which premiered in March 2012, constitutes an excellent illustration of this intermedial quality, and it crystallises the way Lambert-wild et al.’s “physical theatres” are perceived in the French context.

The piece contains very little text that is spoken by a voice-over. The four performers on stage are dancers who, choreographed by Marsalo, have composed a physical score. It is noteworthy that the performers, two men and two women, are also two pairs of twins: the brothers Pierre and Charles Pietri, and the sisters Olga and Elena Budaeva. On stage, an imposing structure represents the banal interior of a house, duplicated. The 4 metres high structure is separated in the middle by a horizontal line: the ceiling of one domestic space is the floor of the other. The audience's spatial perception is challenged by the duplication of a same space into two identical rooms. The upper space is clean and brightly lit; the lower one on the other hand is bathed in a sickly green halo, and a black liquid slowly runs down the surface of the walls, as if emanating from the melting floor of the upper level. When the piece opens, a man and a woman are busy injecting poison into a birthday cake before feeding it to their children. Their progeny cannot be seen but their joyous laughter resonates sinisterly until it fades and eventually stops, shortly after the cake is brought into their bedroom. The couple's crime is unequivocally represented within the opening minutes of the piece: the show consists from then on in the couple's spiralling down into horror. When the first two characters start performing a hysterised physical score, another couple appears through the door of the lower room. They are living-dead presences, seemingly appearing to haunt the first couple. However, over the course of the piece, the distinction between the couple on the upper level and the one on the lower level is disturbed, and not before long it becomes impossible to distinguish who is who: characters appear in each other's domestic space, whilst on both levels the characters battle against the thick black slime

that licks everything, leaving permanent stains that the characters endlessly try – but ultimately fail – to remove.



Figure 10 - *War Sweet War*.
Photos by Tristan Jeanne-Valès

Inspired from a news report, the piece is an exploration of what Lambert-wild sees as the unnameable pressure of war, an all-encompassing and pernicious force that remains invisible, on account of it not directly affecting Western citizens' bodies. The piece aims at expressing the unnameable, and coins, to this effect, a theatrical language that is cross-disciplinary. This is the rationale behind the hiring of *performeurs*: during the first half of 2011, the Comédie de Caen website indeed advertised the position in these terms. As briefly evoked in Chapter 1, *performance* has in French a different meaning than in English, mostly used in reference to “performance art” or “live art”. A *performeur* is therefore someone who is not – only – an actor. During an informal conversation, in February 2012 and shortly before *War Sweet War* premiered, Lambert-wild

lamented the absence on French stages of actors working physically. He evoked his collaborations with foreign actors and physical performers as a way to go beyond such limitations and also beyond the prevalence of spoken language over physicality. It is therefore telling that Lambert-wild should choose to collaborate with *performeurs* or actors trained abroad, given the little space granted to physical training in French acting schools, as I evoked in Chapter 1.



**Figure 11 - *War Sweet War*.
Photos by Tristan Jeanne-Valès**

These conditions partly shaped *War Sweet War*, which Lambert-wild had always imagined as a highly physical piece. But not only did Lambert-wild seek to work with *performeurs*, he also needed them to be two pairs of twins, which significantly limited his options. The two women are thus Russian dancers who do not speak French, a problem that was circumvented by the near-absence of text throughout the performance.¹⁶⁴ The show's challenge of generic boundaries starts here: despite the fact that the piece was performed in a theatre, within a French Centre Dramatique National, it contained little text and focused instead

¹⁶⁴ Lambert-wild himself also steps on stage prior to the beginning of the show, in a halo of light, to briefly introduce the performance, something uncharacteristic of his previous shows. The reason for this address to the audience possibly owes to awareness on Lambert-wild part that the show's generic uncertainty might need to be contextualised for an audience of theatre-goers.

on a highly choreographed physical score. This quality of the piece is repeatedly noted by commentators: one critic describes the piece as “objet théâtral non identifié” (“War Sweet War – objet théâtral”).¹⁶⁵ It is particularly telling that when the English language would have very likely labelled the piece “physical theatre”, in French, it has become “non identifié”, an example of “géniale contamination théâtrale, chorégraphique, plastique et musicale de l’un par l’autre” (*ibid.*).¹⁶⁶ The focus on movement instead of spoken words is also noted as an exceptional quality of the piece, as exemplified by critic Solenn Denis, who explains in a text written as a second-person address to herself: “[e]nfin tu as compris comment le corps pouvait être vecteur de pensée, et pourquoi, parfois, il est nécessaire de se taire” (“A l’indicible”).¹⁶⁷ Denis’s choice of words is, again, exemplary of the way the piece is perceived as crossing generic boundaries, and as expressing something beyond (spoken) language. Movement and physicality are understood as means of expression that lack words: Denis explains that it is “nécessaire de se taire”, even when the physicality of the Budaeva sisters and the Pietri brothers is anything but “silent”. The physical score is what all commentators mention, highlighting how it differs from what is usually seen in a theatre context. Whilst these critics’ comments are mostly positive, they nonetheless echo the rhetoric that was used to talk about the Avignon 2005 “crisis”, as I mentioned in the Introduction, where pieces that did not fit the boundaries of “authentic” theatre (that is, textual theatre), were seen as dance or as the collapse of theatre itself.

¹⁶⁵ “unidentified theatrical object”, a pun on the French for UFO: objet volant non-identifié.

¹⁶⁶ “The genius contamination by one another of theatre, choreography, visual arts and music”.

¹⁶⁷ “You have finally understood how the body could express thought, and why, sometimes, it is necessary to remain silent.”

On the other hand however, this piece is not acknowledged as dance, even by the artists who choreographed it. Marsalo explains for example that “the starting point is theatrical[,] [i]t is the body, more than dance, that is at the core” (“Interview”). However, Marsalo also distinguishes the physicality used in the show from dance-theatre, which, unlike the physical score of *War Sweet War*, “retain[s] the energy of dance”. What Marsalo sees as belonging to the realm of the “theatrical” rather than dance is the fact that “there is in this project something very intellectual, very structured: a form of narrative” (“Interview”), However, when for the devising of *Le Recours aux forêts*, Marsalo and Carlson had Onfray’s text at their disposal and weaved a danced narrative from it, in this specific project “the text [was] absent” (“Interview”). Interestingly, Marsalo sees this decision as “a perilous endeavour” (“Interview”), because of the context – theatrical – within which the piece was created. Indeed, despite the fact that the few reviewers who wrote about the show did so in laudatory terms, that the audience too seem to appreciate it, at least the night I attended the show, and the Comédie de Caen’s efforts to attract programmers from both the theatre and the dance world (Personal conversation; Denis “Paris”), the piece did very little touring. That this is not characteristic of all of Lambert-wild et al.’s projects (*Comment ai-je pu tenir là-dedans* for example toured extensively in France and abroad) underlines how the nature of the piece, as much as its heavy technical requirements, might explain this reluctance on programmers’ part.

War Sweet War epitomises this quality of Lambert-wild et al.’s work that makes it subversive in a French context, where audiences and institutions are very distinctly divided into two separate categories – the dance realm and the theatre realm. It also highlights how the pluri-disciplinary and collaborative

nature of the work gives it a generic uncertainty, given the absence of a “physical theatres” terminology in the French context. In these conditions, it is perhaps not surprising that Jean Lambert-wild, aware of the reticence of French theatre to encompass physicality, should seek to integrate heightened physical scores in his search for alternative theatrical languages. Lambert-wild’s desire to coin modes of representation that are relevant to a contemporary understanding of theatre as site for a “community of humans” (“War Sweet War Interview”) leads him to develop what I have termed “physical theatres”. Such an endeavour is possibly subversive, especially for the way it takes place from within the institution: Lambert-wild claims indeed, according to Corbel in her preface to *Se Tenir debout*, that “il n’y a d’alternative théâtrale ... qu’institutionnelle” (13).¹⁶⁸ Yet, its potential impact should be put in perspective, considering how its sparse touring life, beyond performances at the Comédie de Caen, might not make its incidence as effective as Lambert-wild would wish.

The Displacement of movement

Lambert-wild’s endeavours to coin contemporarily relevant modes of representation echo his assertion that the poetic constitutes a form of subversion. I have suggested that the work he initiates sits uneasily in the French theatrical context; I examine now how Lambert-wild et al.’s work with physicality subverts notions of corporeality and movement in performance. When some pieces co-authored by Lambert-wild are constructed around heightened physical scores, others are characterised by the way movement is *displaced*, either from the performers to their surroundings, or from a heightened physicality to a score of

¹⁶⁸ “There is no theatrical alternative than from within the institution”.

“micro-movement”. This *displacement* recalibrates expectations about movement on stage and suggests alternative notions of physicality, corporeality and tactility that in turn challenge notions of intimacy and propose an alternative theatrical experience.

Micro-movement

When informally reflecting, in a conversation, on his collaboration with Therminarias, Lambert-wild evoked how the composer’s work with microphones recalibrated physicality on stage. Lambert-wild refers to the physical score used in some of the pieces he initiated as “micro-movement” (“Personal Interview” 2010). In some of Lambert-wild et al.’s performances, the performers are paradoxically and simultaneously always *almost* completely still yet *almost* completely in movement.

There are two strands of “micro-movement” in Lambert-wild et al.’s work: on the one hand, the “micro-movement” that constitutes the acting of the performers I call “voice-actors”, such as Bénédicte Debilly in *La Mort d’Adam* or the chorus of four performers in *Le Recours aux forêts*. In both cases, they are relegated to the sides or off-stage. On the other hand, pieces such as *La Mort d’Adam* or *Crise de nerfs - Parlez-moi d’amour*, in which the performers situated centre stage perform minute physical scores yet are the main physical presence on the stage (as opposed to “next to the stage”, where the “voice-actors” are located). I distinguish between these for the sake of clarity. It is however a necessary arbitrary division: as I have explored in the introduction to this chapter, each show is the result of a delicate agency between technique, technology and the fragility of human presence on stage.

In *Crise de nerfs...*, Laure Wolf is strapped to a hospital bed, almost immobile. Her voice is amplified by microphones, and a second amplified voice - Debilly's - while the actress is invisible. The very practical reason behind this decision to impede actors' movement or to have them offstage¹⁶⁹ is that the microphones used by Therminarias are extremely precise. This implies that they are liable to pick up any unwanted noise that movement could produce. Therminarias and his collaborators mix the voices live in performance with the accompanying music, thus composing, as much as arranging, a sonic score every night. As a consequence, both Debilly and Wolf need to focus on delivery. When the show opens, Wolf is lying down, face up, her hands folded on her stomach in a position recalling recumbent effigies. The farthest she gets over the course of the show is sitting: her legs and arms stretched outwards in an attempt to unsuccessfully liberate herself from the bed's embrace. If Wolf's actual physical journey is minimal, her limbs are not still. Instead, her gestures are suffused with a tension that seems to be running through her veins and into her hands and fingers that shiver. Wolf's micro-physicality has what H el ene Harmat defines, in an article on the legacy of pantomime in contemporary performance, "une qualit e d'ouverture avant de signifier" (225).¹⁷⁰ Harmat identifies the actress Isabelle Huppert's hand movement in Claude R egy's production of Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* as possessing a shiver-like quality. Like Wolf's gesture, Huppert's movement is almost inexistent, it is "issu de l'immobilit e du corps".¹⁷¹ Harmat suggests that this movement draws what she terms a "micro-espace": a "micro-space", a "plan d'intimit e" that she sees as innervating the whole performance

¹⁶⁹ Debilly's voice is also heard *in absentia* in *War Sweet War*, and performers' voices are pre-recorded in *La Sagesse des abeilles* or *Mon Amoureux nouveaux pommier*.

¹⁷⁰ "Before it signifies, possesses an open quality."

¹⁷¹ "comes from the stillness of the body".

(225). For Harmat, this is caused by the fact that the gesture does not *mean* anything, but is open to a way of perceiving space that she insinuates is “concrete” (225). Harmat focusses on the way such a movement is located beyond (narrative) meaning; I am not concerned as such with identifying whether gesture constitutes a threat to language or not. Instead, I apply Harmat’s analysis to suggest with her that it creates a “sensation de discours” (225),¹⁷² that it opens up realms simultaneously made available to the audience, suggested through these gestures and simultaneously removed from them as no explanation or justification is provided for their presence.



**Figure 12 - Laure Wolf in *Crise de Nerfs - Parlez-moi d'amour*.
Photo by Tristan Jeanne-Valès**

Wolf’s head is enclosed in a big, translucent sea-diving bubble. The bubble surrounds her hair and face like a halo. Towards the end of the show, the bubble fills up with a white, and then blue-coloured liquid, ingeniously injected between two layers of plastic, giving the effect that the whole bubble is filled with it. This bubble evokes at first ideas of enclosure, of imprisonment, a notion reinforced by the fact that Wolf is strapped to a bed and thus unable to move

¹⁷² “a sensation of discourse”.

freely. It also, however, operates as a protective helmet, a “rêve d’étanchéité contre les agressions extérieures et intérieures” (“Crises de nerfs”),¹⁷³ as if her thoughts were to be kept airtight as much as watertight. If this helmet does not allow anything to get *in*, it also suggests not allowing anything *out*, as the aforementioned quote suggests. This idea of enclosure is mirrored in the show by Wolf’s apparent monologue to herself, and with the aural presence of the second voice that is heard but remains unseen. Notions of enclosure and openness are questioned by the fact that Wolf’s voice itself is amplified. It is thus emitted from *inside* the bubble, but expanded *outside* it. Furthermore, the actress’ voice is coloured by the interiority it emerges from: because it is uttered from inside a closed bubble, there is a subtle echo-like quality to it that is then furthered into the space beyond the bubble. Wolf’s voice is *projected* into the space: while the utterance of the words one hears is visually localisable as happening on stage, in what McAuley calls the “presentational space” (25), its aural localisation is simultaneously in the “presentational” and the “audience” space.

There is a tension between the physical location where the action takes place and where it is experienced. This dimension is further complicated by the fact that the space inside the bubble is both “onstage fictional place”: the actual space of the bubble, and what it evokes. Surrounding the head of the performer, it suggests that it is the location of so many sensory orifices and possibilities of communication – the ears, the mouth – but also where thoughts are localised in Western imaginary. When the bubble fills up with opaque liquid, it suddenly becomes both an “onstage fictional place” and an “offstage” one (25): it is placed on stage but cannot be seen; however, it can still be heard. The audience sees the

¹⁷³ “Dream of a watertight quality, against exterior and interior aggressions”.

helmet surrounding Wolf's head, but what it encloses cannot be localised visually. And because Wolf's words are still amplified, the disappearance of her face is associated with the overwhelming presence of her voice which reflects, in Wolf's own words, the possibility for a more conscious movement of opening: "[I]'absent favorise un mode de présence intense ... Parce que j'étais cachée en partie des regards, ... je pouvais être plus là. Plus m'ouvrir." (*Se Tenir debout* 101).¹⁷⁴

The combination of the performer's minute physicality and the amplification allows the spaces of the performance to become porous, turning the inside into an outside, questioning notions of aloneness and intimacy and fabricating alternative spaces for the fiction to happen on stage: secret spaces, hidden from the audience gaze yet that resonate in their ears. More than ever, the stage fulfils this Bachelardian quality McAuley sees in it: it operates like "[w]ardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers and chests with their false bottoms": as "veritable organs of the secret psychological life" (*Poetics* 78). Escale's caravans operate like Bachelard's caskets for the way they blur boundaries between private and public spaces, revealing corners usually kept away from the gaze. The stage of *Crise de nerfs...* operates in a similar yet reversed dimension: it is a space of intimacy placed in front of the audience but hidden from them.

¹⁷⁴ "Absence favours a mode of intense presence ... Because I was partly hidden from gazes, ... I could be more present. Open up more."

Moving environments

Micro-movement suggests a different mode of attention to the presence of the performer and it allows the representation of intimate realms on stage, operating a reversal between inside and outside. On other occasions, movement is *displaced* from the performers onto the set that surrounds them. Breton folk singer Yann-Fañch Kemener is for example, in *L'Ombelle du trépassé* (2011), immobilised thigh-deep into an imposing column that spins faster and faster whilst Kemener sings. At the end of *Le Malheur de Job* (2008) the curtain closes on the juggler Martin Schwietzke who, surrounded by floating bags, gently rises above ground, apparently unaided, and is seen spinning and floating, surrounded by a swarm of plastic bags, without ever touching ground again. In *La Sagesse des abeilles* (2012), this is pushed even further, with the human performers completely removed from the stage and replaced by a hollow mannequin which hosts a swarm of bees. These examples highlight how movement is *displaced* from the performers to their environment, in a way that challenges expectations about movement in theatre.



Figure 13 - *Le Malheur de Job*.
Photo by Tristan Jeanne-Valès



Figure 14 - *La Sagesse des abeilles*.
Photo by Tristan Jeanne-Valès

Whilst I argue that physicality in performance is experienced on a somatic level by audience members, I also suggest that when movement is *displaced* from the performers onto their environment, a similar effect is at work. If Kemener is not directly physically responsible for his spinning movement, the column nonetheless operates according to what Izabella Pluta calls a “notion de corporalité ... élargie” (190).¹⁷⁵ This extended corporeality is perhaps best illustrated in *Orgia* (2001): on stage, two actors, Mireille Herbstmeyer and Éric Houzelot, are mostly immobile. Their skin is covered in sensors that record their physiological responses and communicate them to a computer. The data is used to generate virtual creatures: the Hyssards and the Apharias, collectively called Posydone. These virtual animals, reminiscent of jellyfish, are then projected on the dark structure that frames the performers. They surround the performers from whom they emerge as, in Pluta’s words, “l’état physiologique de[s] acteur[s] permet aux organismes numériques de fluctuer, de se *nourrir* ou de *procréer*” (190).¹⁷⁶ *Orgia* initiated Lambert-wild’s ongoing dialogue with computer science. Stéphane Pellicia,¹⁷⁷ who designed Daedalus, the program that creates the Posydone, explains that “chaque *Posydone* est ... un agent, c’est à dire une entité qui évolue dans un environnement. Elle est capable de percevoir et d’agir dans cet environnement. Elle peut communiquer avec d’autres agents, et possède un comportement autonome” (25).¹⁷⁸ He adds that the performers are also agents evolving in this environment. The performers, although talking about sensual relationships, do not physically touch each other; nor do they look one another in

¹⁷⁵ “An extended notion of corporeality”.

¹⁷⁶ “The physiological state of the actor allows the numerical organisms to fluctuate, *feed* themselves, *procreate*”.

¹⁷⁷ Pellicia follows now an acting career and performed in several of Lambert-wild et al.’s shows.

¹⁷⁸ “Each *Posydone* is ... an agent: an entity evolving within an environment. It is able to perceive and to act within this environment. It can communicate with other agents, and its behaviour is autonomous”.

the eye. Instead, the movements of the Posydones connect them. Pluta, writing about *Orgia*, says that “Lambert-wild a bâti sa conception de la mise en scène sur la notion de la corporalité et il l’a retranscrite sur plusieurs pistes interprétatives” (190).¹⁷⁹ The Posydones are simultaneously independent from the performers and an extension of their corporeality. In this respect, they emerge from the performers’ internal intimacy and project it outside of their bodies.

This extended corporeality redefines notions of tactility, as illustrated in another scene from *Orgia*. Each actor is placed in front of a darkened rectangular hole in the back wall. Stage left, Herbstmeyer stands still, her head only moving from right to left and to the back. To her left, in another door-like space, Houzelot is crouched, revealing his left profile, his left hand on his knee and his right arm slightly raised so that his hand is level with his mouth. Breathing out into a microphone attached to his face, he fills the space with the sound of air slowly coming in and out of his lungs. The expiration provokes a multitude of *Apharias* to congregate by his mouth in a ball-shaped formation. The creatures multiply, and their large concentration in the ball makes it bright and opaque. As Houzelot expires, the ball turns into a beam pointing towards Herbstmeyer’s open mouth. When the beam eventually “touches” Herbstmeyer’s mouth, the *Apharias* disperse in a cloud. The *Apharias*’ movement from one mouth to the other recalls a long-distance kiss, or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, as the loud sound of breathing concurs to evoke. In *Se Tenir debout*, a book constructed around conversations between Mari-Mai Corbel and Lambert-wild,¹⁸⁰ Laure

¹⁷⁹ “Lambert-wild has constructed his conception of mise en scene on the notion of corporeality, and he transcribes it through several interpretative tracks.”

¹⁸⁰ The book constitutes a rich resource as it spans several of Lambert-wild’s recurring obsessions. It is however flawed by Corbel’s obstinacy, in the interviewing process, to make Lambert-wild say what she wishes him to. Lambert-wild, on the other hand, determinately goes his own way. This gives the book a surprisingly argumentative texture. Tellingly, the book was

Wolf suggests that the *Posydones* create “un vrai lien, d’ordre psychique, sensible”. She adds that “[I]es acteurs ne bougent pas et ne se touchent pas, parce qu’ils se touchent autrement, par la sensibilité, presque une infrasensibilité” (102).¹⁸¹ This idea that the actors *touch* each other while remaining still and at a distance is a potent one, especially when taking into account the fact that, however virtual and immaterial, the creatures’ movements are generated by the actors’ actual physiological responses. This visible yet impalpable *touch* of the *Posydones* emanates from the actors’ most intimate, corporeal reactions to performing and to each other’s presence. In an effect of kinaesthetic empathy, spectators experience the *Posydones*’ movement as they would have experienced the movement of the performers touching each other, while simultaneously knowing, in another example of hypermedial tension, that they are just projections, albeit created from somatic responses to stimuli.

Suggesting that the *Posydones*, mimicking the aspect of touch, can trigger kinaesthetic empathetic responses is evidently a problematic claim since they have no corporeal existence beyond their projected image. This is where the movement of the *Posydones*, generated by the most intimate of one’s body’s reactions, problematises notions of somaticity. The two performers are able to *touch* each other by proxy: their physicality generates such impalpable touch that it, in Wolf’s words, operates on an “infrasensitive” level. These responses can also be present in audience members, who, exposed to these external stimuli alongside other sensorial stimulations – the “coldness” of Therminarias’ music, the colour-scheme for the production: blue, black, white ... - might experience

eventually authored by Lambert-wild himself, who at the end of the process insisted on rewriting his answers as he felt a sense of ethics had been broken. Corbel has however the merit to have compiled a rich document on Lambert-wild’s work.

¹⁸¹ “A real bond, of a psychic, sensitive kind”; “The actors do not move, nor do they touch each other, because they touch each other in another way, in a sensitive, almost infra-sensitive way”.

organic responses to the appearance of touch displayed on stage, thus making touch effective. The *Posydones* become “les seules traces d’affect qui ne soient pas langagières, véritables caresses de lumière, plus réelles que les caresses de la femme sur le ventre de l’homme” (Beauvais, *Phenomena*, 49).¹⁸² On a poetic and phenomenological level, the displacement of movement from the performers’ physicality and onto the virtual *Posydones* redefines *touch* without affecting its quality.

Voices that touch

The *Posydones*, as extensions of the performers’ corporeality, reconfigure notions of tactility. Lambert-wild and Therminarias’ work on voice operates in a similar way, displacing movement from the performers’ physicality and incorporating a somatic dimension into sound. I focus here on the work done on Debilly’s voice in *La Mort d’Adam*, as the sole voice heard throughout the show. Sat in a velvet armchair, on the side, stage right, Debilly reads the text written by Lambert-wild into a microphone. The microphone allows Debilly’s voice to be transformed and modulated by Therminarias during the performance. More importantly, it is specifically designed to be as precise as possible: picking up the faintest of sounds, noises that are not otherwise noticed. The grinding of teeth, the movements of the tongue in the mouth, the flux of saliva, the overwhelming presence of breathing, any movement happening inside Debilly’s mouth and usually withdrawn from consciousness is physicalised, spatialised by a sound. The inner movements of her body are made audible: they are, in Drew Leder’s

¹⁸² “The only traces of affect that are not language-based, true caresses of light, more real than the caresses of the woman on the man’s stomach”.

terms, “dys-appearing” (69). Leder explains the sensorial reasons behind the Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind by the fact that one’s body, and especially one’s inner life, disappear from one’s field of consciousness and are only perceived when “dysfunctioning”. In this case, one’s body is objectified by pain or discomfort, appearing to one’s consciousness through its “dysfunction”, thus “dys-appearing” (69).

A similar effect is at work here, although technologically induced and, unsettlingly, not caused by dysfunctioning. Amplification gives Debilly’s voice - and all that happens in one’s mouth before and after it is uttered - a physical and spatial dimension while emphasising an inner life usually removed from one’s consciousness. This is complicated by the fact that sound is transmitted to the audience via a complex system of amplification: different loudspeakers are distributed around the room, on both sides of the audience. Some of the amplifiers will be placed further up in the rows of seats, others adjacent to the stage; some will be mostly dedicated to bass, others to treble. Each audience member has a slightly different sonic experience from their neighbour, depending on where in the room they are sat. The layout of the amplification system means that sound surrounds the audience and is not “projected” on them frontally. Because it surrounds them, so does Debilly’s voice, enveloping them in a sonic world both familiar and inherently alien.

Sophie Herr’s suggestion that one’s body is a dynamic and elastic mould that imprints its mark onto voice (33) implies a reciprocal: voice also shapes the body from birth, through breathing as a repeated movement. This idea recalls the one developed by Sally Ann Ness in “The Inscription of Gesture”: movement is taken as “the hollowed out consequence of the process of inscription”, onto the

“host” of the writing, in this case, the dancer’s body (4). Here, it is not danced movement, but the dynamic physical activity presupposed by speaking that shapes the corporeality that hosts it. The reciprocal is also valid, and therefore the body is present in voice and its utterance – in the act of speaking itself. Herr goes further and suggests that spoken or sung voice in performance creates “vocal gestures” that are at the same time “internal” – what happens inside one’s organism to make the utterance of voice possible - yet “visible” – what does someone who speaks look like when speaking. Herr establishes a connection between the “audible body” and the “visible” one (35).

Here however, Debilly’s voice is disconnected from the corporeality that utters it. It is saturated with a super-audibility of its corporeal dimension, made present by amplification. The work made on and with voice in *La Mort d’Adam* develops a dialogic relationship between the subject who emits the voice and the voice itself: simultaneously subjective, emerging from a living subject and bearing the blueprints of the “mould”, it is also objectified by its existence as a material presence within the theatrical space. This challenges usual expectations of embodiment on stage, as the person uttering the voice can be seen and felt on stage while the voice she emits is estranged from her.

In a way that echoes the immaterial touch of the *Posydone*s, Debilly’s voice – and with it, a part of Debilly’s corporeality - touches spectators. Danièle Cohen-Lévinas, philosopher and musicologist, identifies the use of breath and scream in contemporary composition as ways to “corporifier la voix” (79).¹⁸³ These meta-vocal characteristics, belonging to voice but remaining on the limen of vocalisation, are rendered audible by the use of microphones in *La Mort*

¹⁸³ “corporify voice”.

d'Adam, yet in a way that is almost accidental. The creative process did not focus on screams or breathing: sounds and noises of the mouth are simply usual correlatives of the utterance of voice. Where my analysis meets Cohen-Lévinas's is on the idea of a "érotisme vocal" (78).¹⁸⁴ Cohen-Lévinas specifies that for a "vocal eroticism" to emerge, "enunciation" is not needed: it is enough for the voice to be "metaphor of a projectile, metaphor of desire". Cohen-Lévinas analyses voice as being an "image motrice d'un corps qui chante, au-delà du chant. Du fait de sa projection inhérente à son émission, elle peut *toucher* ... le corps de celui qui écoute; le corps de l'autre" (78).¹⁸⁵ Voice can *touch* because of the metaphorical dimension attached to it. Herr analyses, on the other hand, that similar sensuality is attached to voice due to its relationship with breathing, which provokes "une intimité sensible" of the body "avec lui-même" and "fait naître la sensation d'une intériorité" (35).¹⁸⁶ In this case, it also touches because of a much more material characteristic: its amplification in the room makes sound palpable. Being in the audience, my body resonated, vibrated, responding to the multitude of stimuli I was submitted to by this amplified voice. The vocal gestures analysed by Herr and Cohen-Lévinas acquire a physical dimension. The amplification of peripheral noises – breath, saliva, swallowing ... - allows the sensual dimension analysed by Herr to touch the performer herself, exposing to her ears sounds usually heard "from inside", and thus further complicating the turning inside out of inner and outer spaces. Voice becomes a gesture that allows two bodies to touch each other, and one's organicity to touch oneself.

¹⁸⁴ "Vocal eroticism".

¹⁸⁵ "Moving image of a body that sings, beyond singing. Because of its projection, inherent to its emission, voice can touch ... the body of the person who is listening: the body of the other".

¹⁸⁶ "A sensitive intimacy" of the body "with itself", and "generates the sensation of an interiority". This movement of "vocal eroticism" echoes the way touch was generated by the performers' breathing in *Orgia*.

The *touch* of voice is complicated by the fact that, unlike in Cohen-Lévinas' example, Debilly's voice is heard uttering a text. Krausse's voice in *Est ou ouest* also resonated through a microphone: it emphasised her efforts, and the text was coloured by her breathing which contained gestures of her corporeality. On the other hand, Debilly's amplified voice *touches* the audience, and consequently, so does the poetic text she utters: the percussive or caressing consonants, the silky vowels, all become touch. The text's inherent poeticity *touches* in a material as much as a metaphorical way, which, if we are to follow Bachelard, has phenomenological value. By displacing movement from performers' physicality onto what surrounds them, Lambert-wild interrogates conceptions of embodied intimacy and challenges ideas of gesture and touch. If immobile actors are able to *touch* each other, emotionally and on a sensorial level, it is the whole idea of embodiment, of physical gesture and of live performance that is re-calibrated.

These examples crystallise how such expanded notion of movement and tactility questions perceptions of intimacy. Despite the fact that each audience member is *touched* by a different aspect of Debilly's voice – due to the spatial arrangement of the amplification system – the audience as a whole is touched by her voice in a way that is both collective and individual. Mark Paterson argues that “[t]he distribution of nerves throughout the body elides any neat distinction between interoception and exteroception in the ongoing nature of somatic experiences, and consequently troubles the notion of the haptic as clearly delimited within an individuated body”. This perspective suggests the inclusion of “sensuous dispositions that exceed anything we might posit as a subjectively felt body-space with a distinct interiority and exteriority” (780). The tactility of

Debilly's voice blurs boundaries "between "my" body and others" that Paterson argues is caused by a historical and cultural "emphasis on sight and the optic" (781). Challenging distinctions between "self" and "other" through touch questions the division between stage and auditorium and further problematises ideas of distance, proximity and corporeality. It allows an experience that is at once individual and collective: it is the dissolution of the boundary between "me" and "other" that transforms the audience into a "community of humans", to paraphrase Lambert-wild.

The "physical theatres" developed by Lambert-wild et al. reconfigure ideas of intimacy in performance by engaging in their audience senses that might not often be solicited in theatre. In this respect, and because they bridge generic boundaries in a context where theatre is still often defined by its relationship to text, these "physical theatres" offer an alternative by enabling an active spectatorship that in turn, has consequences on a social and potentially political level, through the embodied collective intimacy they promote.

"Moving so as to disappear": Poetics of expansion and dispersion

I have examined how the "physical theatres" coined by Lambert-wild et al. challenge boundaries between openness and closure, and were, in the context where they were produced, subversive by overturning theatrical expectations and advocating generic indecision. The movement that subtends Lambert-wild's aesthetics and philosophy of theatre provides a reconsideration of corporeality in performance, and proposes an extended definition of *touch*. In the following

section, I explore how Lambert-wild's project "d'être et penser pour disparaître" (*Se Tenir debout* 21)¹⁸⁷ is put in practice in the way he places movement at the core of subjectivity, so as to see it expand and explode, generating phenomena of duplication, multiplication and evaporation. Constantly questioning this relationship between movement and subjectivity, Lambert-wild puts the former at the service of a poetics of expansion that mirrors his idea, inspired by "molecular biology", that one is constantly dispersing oneself in the universe ("Interview 6 Dec. 2010"). This characteristic is epitomised, for instance, by the bees in *La Sagesse des abeilles*, who become as many individual components of a human-like figure whilst displacing movement from human to animal "performers". Multiplication and duplication are simultaneously a pretext for an over-presence of the Self and a way to disperse its apparent unity, in a way that enables a sense of collective intimacies.

Multiplication, duplication, repetition.

Doppelgangers are present throughout Lambert-wild's oeuvre. This poetics of multiplication sets one's self in motion until one disappears. The recurring presence of Doppelgangers is also connected to the fantasised autobiography he is constructing, on the scale of a lifetime. In the following section, I focus on how these themes figure in *La Mort d'Adam*, a production to which the theme of the Doppelganger is intrinsically connected, partly due to the presence of Jeremiah McDonald, presented as Lambert-wild's mysterious American double.

¹⁸⁷ "to be and to think so as to disappear".

Adam is a magnificent white bull, brought on the island of La Réunion by the narrator's father, and destined to beget a herd. The bull is treated as a God-like figure, symbol of fertility, power and purity. However, the herd is soon contaminated by a disease "caché[] dans les plis putrides de l'île" (*La Mort d'Adam* 45),¹⁸⁸ and every animal is slaughtered. Adam too is a victim of the massacre. The show ends on a traumatic image: the whole family eating the bull after the destruction of the flock.¹⁸⁹ *La Mort d'Adam* is the first of Lambert-wild's show that actively deals with his native island, and footage incorporated in the piece meant Lambert-wild had to go back to his homeland for the first time in almost two decades. Lambert-wild feared that going back would erase the memories accumulated during childhood and adolescence, so he returned dressed as his "clown" and blindfolded - or at least, this is what he claims. For those a little familiar with Lambert-wild's work, as I was when I travelled to Caen for the second time in December 2010, everything was orchestrated to blur the distinction between who was Lambert-wild, and who was McDonald. Having watched the documentary available via the Comédie de Caen website beforehand, and knowing Lambert-wild's "clown" character for his many appearances in the Calentures, I was ready to believe that the blindfolded character was Lambert-wild himself and not McDonald.

The documentation surrounding *La Mort d'Adam* furthers this impression. Lambert-wild, for example, is not acknowledged as a performer, leaving full credit to McDonald. This uncertainty as to who is on stage during the

¹⁸⁸ "hidden in the island's putrid folds".

¹⁸⁹ Patrice Pavis analysed the presence in *La Mort d'Adam* of a "dimension secrètement colonial[e]" ("secretly colonial dimension"), exemplified by such "opposition entre la terre femelle réunionnaise et l'animalité mâle européenne" ("opposition between the female Réunion land and the male European animality") (*L'Écriture à Avignon*, 16). Lambert-wild's show presents other problematic trends, for example in the treatment it does of female characters turning into devout maids to the bull's overpowering sexual energy.

performance is kept alive as long as possible prior to the show in order to allow the performance's first magical effect to take place. In the first ten minutes of the performance, two doors raise from the ground. The first door opens, revealing McDonald behind it. It closes, and almost immediately the second door, separated from the first one by a few meters, opens... revealing the same character in striped pyjamas and leather sandals. The game is repeated for a few minutes, leaving one wondering how such effect is possible, until the reduction of the time elapsed between the closing of one door and the opening of another makes clear that there are two performers. In a cleverly orchestrated paradox, Lambert-wild offers the image of his own duplication: him and McDonald appear as each other's Doppelgänger.¹⁹⁰ This doubling effect blurs the contours of Lambert-wild's identity. It is for example paradoxical that Lambert-wild's self-acknowledged "autobiographie", despite being "fantasised", shall be altogether performed by someone other than himself. Both McDonald's and Lambert-wild's identity is de-multiplied and questioned, in a reversal of the boundaries between Self and other,¹⁹¹ illustrated in these words that, in the press release, are attributed to McDonald: "[a]près la transmission de son clown, c'est une part de lui-même et de son histoire que *nous partageons*" (The emphasis is mine) ("Mort d'Adam – Dossier de production").¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Long-term collaborator of Lambert-wild Christophe Farion, acknowledged in a conversation the indirect reference made here to the Hollywood film *The Prestige* (2006).

¹⁹¹ It is also significant that McDonald should have been entrusted, between 2009 and 2012, with the realisation of the "Screen Calentures", short films that feature the "clown".

¹⁹² "Along with the transmission of his clown, we now *share* a part of him and of his history." It first occurred to me that McDonald could seem to be utilised by Lambert-wild. It appeared instead that the collaboration was respectful of McDonald's ambitions. To an extent, McDonald's performing career was highly, if not almost solely enabled by Lambert-wild, who also provided McDonald with a regular income at a time where McDonald was struggling financially. Past the tongue-in-cheek effect of duplication and identity mystery surrounding *La Mort d'Adam*, McDonald's work is also constantly acknowledged and credited.

The way Lambert-wild and McDonald started collaborating is anecdotic, albeit especially relevant in this story of Doppelgangers. It also shaped the way I approached the fieldwork, interacted at the time with both Lambert-wild and McDonald, and experienced *La Mort d'Adam*. McDonald has been, for the past few years, an active YouTube user, posting short films of his own making,¹⁹³ some of which reached several million views, such as *YouTube is My Life* (2006) and *A Conversation With My Twelve Year Old Self* (2012). Lambert-wild is said to have come across McDonald's work by accident and to have been surprised at the resemblance between McDonald and himself. His assistant Aurélia Marin contacted McDonald in an email, simply stating the physical resemblance. This tale of duplication is humorously supplemented by the fact that the email was mistakenly addressed to one of McDonald's multiple personae: aspiring actor Bernard K. Smith.¹⁹⁴ The Comédie de Caen offered to fly McDonald over to France, and he thus set off from Portland, Maine, to Caen, Normandy, expecting to be auditioned for his mime skills.¹⁹⁵ Instead, he was briefly introduced to Lambert-wild and less than twenty four hours later, was dressed in Lambert-wild's characteristic outfit – tailor-made military-inspired trousers and ranger boots, mariner's shirt and braces, another illustration of how carefully constructed Lambert-wild's social persona is – his head and facial hair closely

¹⁹³ McDonald holds a degree in Filmmaking.

¹⁹⁴ Bernard K. Smith was McDonald's persona in the YouTube Church of Blow series. Smith played the Reverend Cornelius Blow, in an effect of *mise en abîme*. These details contribute to the creation of a fantasised autobiography for McDonald himself. If in conversation, McDonald is keen on sharing any factual detail of his work, as opposed to Lambert-wild who enjoys a certain part of mystification, his public persona is composed of a multitude of different identities, a trait McDonald acknowledges in a tongue-in-cheek way in work such as *The Doppelganger* (2010). It is fascinating to consider that the man Lambert-wild decided to entrust with the mission to act as a Doppelganger had himself a history of public duplication.

¹⁹⁵ McDonald trained in mime, albeit for a surprisingly brief amount of time considering his technical abilities. He attended workshops at Tony Montanaro's Celebration Barn Theater in South Paris, Maine, during the summers of 1998 and 1999 ("La Mort d'Adam - Dossier de production" 18). Montanaro, who died in 2002, had trained in Paris, France with Marcel Marceau and Étienne Decroux (*Celebration Barn*).

shaved so as to bear as much resemblance as possible with Lambert-wild. It also quickly appeared that his mime skills, although much appreciated, were not actually what Lambert-wild had been interested in in the first place (McDonald “Interview”).

Lambert-wild’s explanation behind the decision to hire McDonald, in spite of potential financial and emotional costs, is even more surprising for its almost legendary aura: having come across McDonald’s work on YouTube, Lambert-wild he was then convinced McDonald was a “Néphélyn” – another key concept of this Lambert-wildian worldview (“Interview”).¹⁹⁶ If this explanation seems highly fanciful, it is nonetheless the only one available: no other version of the events was ever provided to me, neither by the two main protagonists, nor by any of their collaborators. The most surprising, and maybe inspiring element of the story, is probably Lambert-wild’s strong will to conduct his projects as far as is practically possible. For this piece, he thus hired an unknown actor from another continent so as to combine two of the elements he is interested in: collaborating with a “Néphélyn”, and playing on physical resemblance so as to further complicate his fantasised autobiography. This has repercussions outside of the stage too, and Lambert-wild’s social persona – the artistic director of a CDN, a writer, etc – and his artistic persona – the “clown” who appears in *Calentures* or in *La Mort d’Adam*, - are two sides of the same coin. Lambert-wild describes the “clown”, in an interview with Jean-François Perrier, as a figure who “agit dans tous les espaces: sur une scène, sur Internet ... dans le bureau

¹⁹⁶ Here is the definition Lambert-wild gives of the term “Néphélyn”: “Caractères forts. Personnes destinées à la scène par quelque décret mystérieux. Le terme provient d’un mythe présent dans l’Ancien Testament. Se reporter au livre de Tim Powers *The Stress of Her Regard*.” (1989). (“Strong characters. People destined to perform on stage because of some mysterious order. The term comes from a myth of the Old Testament. See the book by Tim Powers: *The Stress of Her Regard*.” (*Se Tenir debout* 89)

d'un directeur de structure".¹⁹⁷ This description highlights a common Lambert-wildian idea: that he, himself, is a "clown" who does not completely know what he is doing.¹⁹⁸ This imagined dimension of one's life appears in the way Lambert-wild "stages" his social persona. For instance, the non-capitalised "w" of "-wild" is unusual for a French name. Lambert-wild himself pointed out this anomaly in a conversation, emphasising its strangeness and evoking the possibility for his name to actually be a pseudonym... without however giving away the key of the mystery. Lambert-wild also only dresses in a specific, uniform-like outfit that borrows marine and military sartorial codes. Very much like a character in a comic book, Lambert-wild remains almost always exactly the *same*. Lambert-wild owns several versions of his entirely tailor-made uniform. This means that, since the beginning of his career, Lambert-wild has always and only been pictured wearing this trademark outfit. The bewildering idea that he might have, in fact, thought through his whole artistic and social life means his fantasised autobiography operates like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This decision is for Lambert-wild a "technique lymphatique" that allows him to be an "anticorps" against the "poison" of a society that transforms theatre into entertainment ("Personal Interview" 2010).¹⁹⁹ These processes of duplication allow Lambert-wild to be at once singular and multiple. On a thematic and practical level, Lambert-wild challenges notions of intimacy and subjectivity by disturbing delineations between self and other. Such uncertainty shaped the way one – and myself in particular, since the second period of fieldwork was all devoted to *La Mort d'Adam* – approached the piece and the

¹⁹⁷ "Operates in all spaces: on stage, on the Internet ... in the office of the director of a theatre."

¹⁹⁸ Jean-Pierre Han devotes a whole section of his insightful study of Lambert-wild's work and of his mythical autobiography to the "clown".

¹⁹⁹ A "lymphatic technique", "antibody".

context in which it takes place. By questioning notions of intimacy and individuality in an embodied way, both on and outside the stage, Lambert-wild furthers his “physical theatres” and provides a renewed understanding of the self. This is likely to transpire in the way one approaches his work, as such a collective intimacy constitutes an exception in the context where it is produced.

The Collective

Lambert-wild’s persona is inherently connected to his artistic project. In both, movement is the dynamic force that pushes oneself out of one’s skin, in a succession of poetic and essential permutations: “mues successives ... qui ont laissé derrière elles des exuvies, ces morceaux de peau qui se détachent du corps ... Quelle identité cette accumulation crée-t-elle ? Une identité fantasmée plus que véritable, car la vérité au théâtre m’importe peu.” (“La Mort d’Adam – Dossier de production” 13).²⁰⁰ This demultiplication of the Self is echoed by the collaborative nature of Lambert-wild’s project, which paradoxically suggests a constant tension between the fabrication of one man’s fantasised autobiography and his refusal to be the sole author of such a project. Jean-Pierre Han draws a parallel between Lambert-wild’s multiple yet unique identity, the porosity of his name, and the multiplicity of participants acknowledged as authors of his shows. In Han’s words: “[t]he singular and the plural are always conjugated like this within him” (34). Such approach to devising, and especially to authoring, is unusual in the French context, as I suggested in Chapter 1. For Lambert-wild,

²⁰⁰ “Regular transitions from one state to another, successive sloughs, that have left behind exuviae, those pieces of skin that detach themselves from one’s body. ... Which identity is created by such accumulation? An identity more fantasised than true, for truth in theatre does not matter to me.”

“un individu est une foule” (*Se Tenir debout* 122),²⁰¹ a dimension he puts in practice by being constantly the same yet multiple. In this respect, the creation of a piece is the sum of all its components. Lambert-wild’s fascination with the recurring image of a multiple and layered Self is echoed by this collective approach to devising, which offers an example of how ways of making theatre, within the institution, can be, formally at least, subversive. Advocating for a mode of creation that encompasses the collective, Lambert-wild operates against the industry’s standards by making room for collaboration in a state-funded institution; working against the dominance of text by making the writing process contemporary to the devising and by hiring performers who deliver silent scores. He also subverts the figure of the director as author and proposes instead the one of director as facilitator, as he is keen to stress in conversations, despite the paradox inherent to making a company execute such a personal project.

Conclusive remarks

Movement is the incentive that lies beneath each Lambert-wild’s artistic endeavours. It is used in a way that subverts expectations about intimacy and about space. On the other hand, such emphasis on movement, both physically and metaphorically, and the collective approach to the making of the work – what would certainly be described in the UK as a “devising” process, with no supremacy of one medium and one authorial voice over another – goes at counter-current with the way theatre is often thought of and created in France. This characteristic of Lambert-wild et al.’s processes is recurrently acknowledged by commentators, and it constitutes an exception in an

²⁰¹ “The individual is a crowd”.

institutional context that names one individual at the head of a Centre Dramatique National instead of a resident company. By promoting such a collective working ethos, and by insisting on working with the same collaborators over the years, the ones Debilly describes as “sa famille de travail”²⁰² (*Se Tenir debout* 81), Lambert-wild proposes an alternative to dominant theatre-making processes. Lambert-wild’s working processes are another expression of the same principle of expansion and dispersion that governs both his public *persona* and his artistic enterprise.

By the fact that he so often places physicality and movement at the core of his artistic processes and of his productions, Lambert-wild’s work constitutes an anomaly. His interest in actors’ physicality, their corporeality and the movement vocabularies they master distinguish his work from an industry still often defined by acting in service of a text. Defying generic boundaries, his work tends to be “un-classifiable”. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most successful of his shows are the ones which fit within specific categories such as dance or mime: *Le Recours aux forêts* or *Comment ai-je pu tenir là-dedans* still tour nationally and internationally, while *La Mort d’Adam* is rarely performed. I wonder whether because the heightened choreography of *Le Recours aux forêts* is more likely to be commodified, while the “micro-mouvements” of *La Mort d’Adam* would remain subversive, the former is more likely to find an immediate audience. The intermediality at work in *Le Recours aux forêts*, self-referential yet spectacular, is likely to echo Lavender’s predicament that “effects of simultaneity in contemporary mixed-media theatre are part of a larger cultural turn that is predicated upon an interplay between synthesis and multivalence, the

²⁰² “His family of work”.

actual and the virtual, the here and the there” (55), and that, as such, intermedial performances of the kind are likely to become “theatre for an age of consumption” (65), where spectacle wins over the radicalism of the message. This is a dimension Lambert-wild is extremely wary of, and to say that *Le Recours aux forêts* is spectacle only would not do justice to the intentions behind the work. Indeed, it is perhaps more directly accessible than *La Mort d’Adam* or *War Sweet War*, yet it remains formally daring. The relationship of metaphor between the text and the choreography, however, pushes towards an easier interpretation of the piece’s message. *La Mort d’Adam* on the other hand displays an intermedial performance that actually disrupts the very notion of spectacle while presenting tracks for a reconsideration of narrative. The subversive dimension of Lambert-wild’s work might lay in the way movement is used and combined with intermedial textures to push further boundaries of theatre – physical, spatial boundaries, but also challenging what one expects to be representable. Movement is here used to coin alternative codes of narration. Pavis analyses such quality in *La Mort d’Adam*, arguing that its structure is at the same time the one of a “récit linéaire et poème en prose” (“L’Ecriture à Avignon” 15).²⁰³ Pavis adds that in spite of the plurality of mediums and narrative layers, there is “une forte identité narrative”,²⁰⁴ narrative identity Pavis situates in the “mise en scène” itself. It is significant that Pavis has chosen to include *La Mort d’Adam* in his 2010 survey of the “tendances d’un retour à la narration” in contemporary theatre production.²⁰⁵ In this respect, Lambert-wild et al.’s “physical theatres” coin alternative modes of representation that redefine the boundaries of narrative theatre.

²⁰³ “Linear narrative and poem in prose”.

²⁰⁴ “A strong narrative identity”.

²⁰⁵ “The tendency of a return to narration”.

Finbugh and Lavery's suggestion that French theatres are "frequently politically neutralized" and that their radical potential lies in the way they are often "aesthetically avant-garde" (11) seem, at first sight, to fit Lambert-wild's project. I argue, however, that such a project is fuelled by a desire from Lambert-wild himself to coin a poetics that is also a subversive political endeavour: "la poésie n'est pas seulement un geste de contemplation, c'est un mouvement qui redéfinit notre dignité en toute situation", a maxim that Mari-Mai Corbel summarises as "la poésie peut aussi avoir une efficacité politique" (*Se Tenir debout* 20).²⁰⁶ The fact that, as expressed by Corbel in her preface, Lambert-wild only imagines an alternative as originating from within the institution (13) prefigures a conscious desire to coin a poetics that constitutes an act of resistance. His decision to work collectively and to create "physical theatres" participate in this project, for the way they both go against dominant models of creation in the French context. The way these "physical theatres" coin alternative experiences for an audience to be a somatically active community of spectators furthers subverts expectations about performance-making and about spectatorship.

These dimensions are corroborated by the Comédie de Caen's schemes aimed at promoting a wider inclusion of the local community in the life of the institution, schemes that Lambert-wild has worked towards since his nomination in 2007. Finally, Lambert-wild's "autobiographie fantasmée" and his intention to "disparaître" propose an alternative to dominant representations of the individual and of the artist. Even if his productions very rarely address political matters

²⁰⁶ "poetry is not only a contemplative gesture, it is a movement that redefines one's dignity in all situations"; "poetry can also be politically efficient".

straightforwardly, Lambert-wild et al.'s work constitutes a potentially subversive enterprise, on an artistic, sensorial and at the level of cultural policies.

CHAPTER 5:

THE UNRELIABLE THEATRE OF TOLD BY AN IDIOT

Told by an Idiot was founded in 1993 by Hayley Carmichael, Paul Hunter and John Wright, and has since aimed at creating “a style of theatre that is bigger than life”, “through collaborative writing, anarchic physicality and a playful but rigorous approach to text” (Website). From their first production, *On The Verge of Exploding* (1993), inspired by Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Told by an Idiot’s work has often been motivated by literature and storytelling. They have found inspiration in figures as varied as French jazzman and novelist Boris Vian (in *I Am A Fool To Want You*, 2004), libertine myth Casanova in an eponymous show (2007), or Spanish artists Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca (*I Weep At My Piano*, 1998). This taste for stories led them to collaborate on several occasions with acclaimed authors and poets of the likes of Carol Ann Duffy, who wrote the script for *Casanova*, or Biyi Bandele for *Happy Birthday, Mister Dekka D* (1999). Several other shows consist of adaptations of books: Philip Pullman’s novel inspired *The Firemakers Maker’s Daughter* (2003) and Michael Faber’s short story gave rise to *The Fahrenheit Twins* (2009). Yet, despite the strong influence of novels and literature on the company’s work, Told by an Idiot have only on a few occasions worked with a script that existed prior to the rehearsal process.²⁰⁷ In recent years, Told by an Idiot have seen their work co-produced and performed in high profile

²⁰⁷ With their staging of *Playing the Victim* (2003) by the Presnyakov Brothers for example.

or traditional theatre venues. Paul Hunter for example directed *The Comedy of Errors*, co-produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company (2009-2011), and the Royal Exchange in Manchester co-produced the company's take on the Broadway classic *You Can't Take It With You*, programmed during their 2011-2012 festive season.

Whilst several of the company's shows have been inspired by literature, and many actually comprise a text, Carmichael acknowledges that at its inception their work was motivated by a common desire to "tell a story that could be understood by watching it, not hearing it", which supposed that for a long time, "if there were words, they weren't telling the story" ("Interview"). In this manner, Told by an Idiot acknowledge *I Weep At My Piano* as a significant turning point: "for the first time, narrative [was] not the driving force within the production. The focus shift[ed] instead, to a dreamlike world full of atmosphere and illusion" ("I Weep At My Piano"). This encapsulates the characteristics of their theatre: it is concerned with telling stories, with developing coherent fictional worlds, but it does so in a way that is not linear and with little concern for questions of factual accuracy. Instead, the company promote an "unreliable" theatre (Hunter, "Interview") that is concerned with creating atmospheres whilst highlighting the craft. The production this chapter focuses on, *You Can't Take With You*, created from a script, therefore constitutes an exception in the company's repertoire.

Told by an Idiot can be placed on an informal family tree that includes "physical theatres" companies such as Kneehigh, Improbable, Complicite, and

more remotely Frantic Assembly or Gecko.²⁰⁸ I include it in such horizontal genealogy for the way it highlights that relations between these companies are less hierarchical than a result of artistic cross-pollination.²⁰⁹ In this regard, they belong to a generation of devised theatre-makers that is now relatively well established in the UK, having been making work for up to three decades. Told by an Idiot share with these companies certain aesthetic and formal characteristics that define what I have circumscribed as “physical theatres”: a collective and collaborative approach to devising, what co-director Carmichael terms “writing” shows in the rehearsal room (“Interview”), and a focus on physicality. When I asked Paul Hunter during an interview whether he considered their work as being physical theatre, in the sense commonly used, he provided an amusingly fitting answer:

I would say we don't work in the field of physical theatre. Partly I think because all theatre is physical, it is a term I find slightly strange... I know why it was invented, if you like, but I find it a very odd expression. Second part of the question: I think absolutely, yeah! We're really passionate about theatre that is physical, visual, exploring narratives, I mean... it's the fourth time in eighteen years we've ever done a text! (“Interview”)

²⁰⁸ It is for example in this way that the company is promoted in the “Marketing Pack” designed for *The Farenheit Twins*, available on the company's website (7). Hunter however expressed surprise when I mentioned this association, specifying that the Pack had not been written by him, yet acknowledging how such an association could be useful to target programmers.

²⁰⁹ For instance illustrated in occasional collaborations between these companies, with actor Nick Haverson working for both Told by an Idiot (*And The Horse You Rode In On*, 2011) and Improbable (*The Devil and Mister Punch*, 2012), writer Carl Grose collaborating with Told by an Idiot (*The Dark Philosophers*, 2011) and Kneehigh (*Don John*, 2009, albeit as a performer), designer Michael Vale working for Kneehigh as well as Told by an Idiot (*Never Try This At Home*, 2013) or Hunter performing in Kneehigh's *Rapunzel* (2007).

Like most theatre-makers whose work is associated with physical theatre by the press and commentators, there is a conscious desire to avoid any labelling that is perceived as not doing the work justice.²¹⁰ Told by an Idiot's association and crossovers with companies such as Kneehigh or Improbable highlight their position in the British theatre industry: having started as a small-scale, "fringe" company, they expanded to make work that is occasionally produced and performed in a more traditional, established context.²¹¹

Whilst I had an experience of Told by an Idiot's work as an audience member before I attended their rehearsals, my understanding of their work owes to the "fieldwork" I conducted in November 2011, when I sat in devising sessions for *You Can't Take It With You*. This fieldwork, composed of a period of rehearsal observation and a performance of the show, is the main focus of this chapter, for practical reasons first: when I had witnessed rehearsals and performances of work that had already been made, in the case of Escale and Lambert-wild et al., I examined with *You Can't Take It With You* the genesis of a production. Moreover, the company's administrators were only able to provide video recordings for two past performances, when both Escale and Lambert-wild et al. had put at my disposal the entirety of their video archive. This, of course, informed my decision to focus on the one aspect of the company's work I therefore, by default, knew the most.

²¹⁰ See for instance the similar answers given by McDermott or Graham and Hoggett mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis.

²¹¹ Improbable's Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch for example designed a Broadway version of *The Addams Family*, Kneehigh's co-artistic director Emma Rice directed a West End production of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (2011). Kneehigh also illustrates this blurring between the two sides of the industry with *The Asylum*, their "nomadic theatre space". The way *The Asylum* compares to Escale's marquee is particularly telling of the positioning of "physical theatres" in the one and the other contexts.

Working as a professional theatre-maker in the UK at the time of this fieldwork meant I approached it with a prior embodied knowledge of the type of “physical theatres” Told by an Idiot were making, yet little experience of the high-visibility, traditional context – Manchester Royal Exchange - they were making it in. As stated in Chapter 2, my approach, drawing on dance ethnography, meant I was able to position myself as a participant-observer. In a way similar to Cynthia Novack’s perspective when observing contact improvisation (*Sharing the Dance*), I was during the fieldwork familiar with the cultural context and the performance practice I was examining. This meant I had a personal knowledge of the economic, social and cultural implications of making “physical theatres” in Britain, and I was known by several members of the company as a “physical theatres” practitioner, both dimensions that were not present when I examined the two French companies. These conditions naturally informed the fieldwork, the way I approached it and how participants interacted with me.

As I specified in Chapter 2, whilst I draw on an ethnographic approach to analyse rehearsals, my project differs from endeavours such as Gorman’s or McAuley’s as I do not focus on the dynamics between the participants in the rehearsal room and the way these dynamics reflect a wider social context. Instead, I draw on a dance ethnography approach and apply to the study of “physical theatres” a perspective that encompasses the “intrinsic” – the “culture ... that inform the art work” - and “extrinsic” – “the sensual qualities of experience” - aspects of movement (“Sense, Meaning and Perception” 270). Movement is understood here as both a core element of Told by an Idiot’s aesthetics, and a pragmatic approach to devising. As I have done in the fieldwork

on Escale, and the one on Lambert-wild et al., I focused on “the interplay” between “the technical and conceptual developments and experiments with the ... form itself”, “the lives and perspectives of the ... participants”, “the responses of the viewers” and finally “the means through which [the work] is organized and produced” (Novack *Sharing the Dance* 15). This perspective underlines the way Told by an Idiot’s “physical theatres” sit within the wider British theatre industry, crossing boundaries between perceived “fringe” and “mainstream” contexts. I examine if, in the context of the Royal Exchange, these “physical theatres” still constitute an embodied tool for an alternative experience of performance, or if on the contrary they relinquish to a process of commodification. Concentrating on the material gathered during the fieldwork, I analyse the generative strategies used by the company to make work that *feels* true to their aesthetic ethos when operating in a context where such aesthetics are not dominant.

“Shaking things up”: movement as creative impulse

“It’s just a read-through, but we’re going to *do* it instead”: Paul Hunter’s pragmatic approach to the script.

The reasons that informed Told by an Idiot’s decision to work with a script for *You Can’t Take It With You*, a choice uncharacteristic of their usual processes, are multiple: more than just Hunter’s expressed admiration for the craft with which the play had been written (Hunter, “Interview”),²¹² the limited timeframe allocated for the creation of the piece is likely to have weighted

²¹² Whilst the show is authored by Told by an Idiot, Hunter alone directed it, with Carmichael following the process as an “outside eye”.

heavily towards this choice. The fact that Hunter had to work with a cast composed of both performers he had collaborated with before and actors who had been recruited through the Royal Exchange casting process, whom he did not know, must also have been influential in this decision. In addition, the fact that, according to the company, venues such as the Royal Exchange – and the Royal Court a few years before – seemed wary of collaborating with a devised theatre company, especially on a piece of work that they would generate in rehearsals, presumably weighted towards this choice of working from a script.²¹³ That *Told by an Idiot* decided to work from a script is not exceptional per se. Given the context of production of this piece, it is likely that most performers involved in the process, who would work in all part of the performing arts industry, would have been used to working with scripts. In this respect, it is a feature that was presumably more exceptional for *Told by an Idiot* than for most of the rehearsal's participants. On the other hand, the company's approach to the text, being distinctly movement-centred, constitutes what in this context proved simultaneously exceptional for the occasion, yet usual for the company.

The morning of November 8th, the second day of rehearsal, started with Hunter exclaiming: “it’s just a read-through, but we’re going to *do* it instead”.²¹⁴ Hunter stressed that the exercise was “not about acting or about the character, but about the performance”. Instead of reading their lines, the actors who were performing the scene were invited to leave their script with fellow performers who would “feed” them their lines. This implied that the actors, although familiar with the text and on occasion knowing their lines beforehand, did not

²¹³ Carmichael indeed suggested during our interview that traditional venues, that tend to programme plays, are more likely to accept a collaboration with “physical theatres”-makers if there is a “story” that can be read beforehand. At least, Carmichael analysed this dimension as having informed most of the company’s relationships with similar venues.

²¹⁴ The emphasis is mine to replicate Hunter’s intonation in the rehearsal room.

have the script in hand and were instead invited to perform their characters' actions as the stage directions, read out loud, indicated. The actors' improvisations in response to the stage directions proved very entertaining. Not having to worry about the psychological rationales for their interpretation, the actors' work really highlighted the dynamics and pace of the play as they were embedded in the text. The "doing" advocated by Hunter had put the text "on its feet", in a process that emphasised movement as an aesthetic, practical and metaphorical principle.

This approach is not surprising for a company working in a "physical theatres" context. Focusing on movement as an initial impulse is acknowledged as a classic devised and physical theatre technique: both practitioners and academics that have spoken on the topic highlight this characteristic (Govan, Nicholson, Normington, *Making a Performance*; Keefe and Murray, *Physical Theatres*; Graham, Hoggett, *Frantic Assembly*). These were also processes I, as a "physical theatres" practitioner, had an embodied understanding of and was therefore able to rapidly identify. My own approach to devising, informed by my work with Little Bulb Theatre, builds on the actions and movement of the characters we create, before a psychological rationale is found for these actions. The focus is then on the overall dynamics and dramaturgy of a scene, rather than on individual performances. When I questioned Carmichael about this process and asked whether it was characteristic of the company's approach, she replied that when the work in the rehearsal room was becoming too "psychological", it was then "very slow to get anything up on its feet". More importantly perhaps, Carmichael also acknowledged that it allowed them to "work with different actors", since "a lot of [them] are much more prone to becoming psychological".

In her words: “in order to cut through ...the conversation about “how do I feel about this?”, it’s easier to just use this process, to try to get people on board and come with you in that process, even people who might be new to it” (“Interview”). In this capacity, such a pragmatic approach erases differences between the different participants, enabling, as I will analyse later on, the emergence of a collective company identity.

If these processes were familiar to me, who was accustomed to devised and physical practices, they were not identified as such by some of the actors working on the piece. They appeared instead as surprising and presumably unexpected: this is at least the way Sarah Ridgeway, cast in the production to play the part of Alice Sycamore, wrote about them in the blog she kept during the rehearsal process, available via Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre’s website. Her words on the matter are illuminating:

Day two, you might think that all surprises were over. But oh no. 10am: Paul Hunter announces that we are going to embark on a run. Yes, a whole run. Without [sic] scripts. Now, I know this company is called “Told by an Idiot”, but really?! Yes, this wasn’t a joke. And we did it. Stage Managers and helpful volunteers fed the actors the lines and the moves as described in the piece. Slowly but surely, we managed to run the whole play. ... Lines that were vaguely funny on paper seem suddenly to be utterly outrageous when acted out on stage... (“Hello”)

Ridgeway's comments first highlight a sense of surprise at discovering Hunter's working processes, something that suggests she might not have been used to such an approach. This is further emphasised in the "Week 2" section of her blog where she states that she is, at the time of writing, not part of a "conventional rehearsal process" ("Week 2!"). Whether Ridgeway's surprise is sincere or rhetorical does not affect the fact that, in the context where the play was rehearsed and later performed, such an approach was perceived (or presented) as challenging conventional approaches. If these processes were familiar to Ridgeway, she must have assumed they would not be for her readership – the audience of the Royal Exchange - hence the tone of surprise and disbelief she writes with. This way, she implicitly acknowledges the novelty of these techniques in the context where the piece was produced and performed.

The collective

I have examined how the pre-existence of the play text and its possible ascendancy over other aspects of the rehearsal process was circumvented by an emphasis on movement and on *doing*. This aligning of the text with other elements of the rehearsal process, characteristic of a "physical theatres" approach, and the emphasis on a practical exploration of the dynamics developed in the script, was paired with an attempt to develop a similarly horizontal relationship between the participants in the room. Despite evident divides – Hunter remained the director and rehearsal leader – the process tended towards a collaborative, collective endeavour. This partly collaborative approach to the work constitutes what, once again, proved unusual in the context where the play was being rehearsed. Heddon and Milling analyse devising as "a social

expression of non-hierarchical possibilities; a model of cooperative and non-hierarchical collaboration; an ensemble; a collective”. (4) Characterised by a collaborative and relatively non-hierarchical approach, the rehearsals for *You Can't Take It With You* therefore bore the mark of Told by an Idiot's “physical theatres” processes. Carmichael states in an interview about *The Fahrenheit Twins* that the company's processes are “always collaborative” and that “everyone [involved] has a voice”, a rhetoric extensively repeated by the company throughout their statements. Carmichael adds that “the ideas can come from everyone; there's not a traditional “the director leads the day” kind of thing” (“Interview 2009” 16). That Carmichael opposes this approach to what she calls a “traditional” one suggests she acknowledges that hers and Hunter's processes might be perceived as out of the ordinary in certain contexts. Since this interview is part of an “Education Pack”, available via the company's website, it suggests that the practitioners acknowledge their working technique as possibly unfamiliar for a reader accustomed to more traditional theatre-making – where the actor is still often considered an interpreter, as opposed to the “creatives”.²¹⁵

Told by an Idiot's collaborative approach, by no means exceptional for a “physical theatres” company but unusual in the context where *You Can't Take It With You* was rehearsed, was put in practice several times in rehearsal. Segments of the opening scene, for example, came from a suggestion made by two performers. During the first “furniture ballet”, as the company called the danced sequences in between scenes where the set, put on wheels, would be moved around the stage, Joanne Howarth's character Penny, an amateur playwright, is sitting at her desk. Whilst the table is moved away from her by another

²¹⁵ See for instance Clare Brennan's post in the *Guardian*: “Why Distinguish Between “Cast” and “Creatives” in Theatre Productions?”.

performer, a third actor intends to mirror this set change by pushing her chair in unison with the movements of the desk. Because Howarth is still on the chair, however, the enterprise proves more difficult than pushing the desk; much comic effect ensues at seeing the two performers acknowledge each other's difficulty or ease. This scene was generated in the rehearsal room, on the second day, and was informed by the fact that, in the very early stages of the devising process, not all furniture had yet been put on wheels. When trying out ideas for the "furniture ballet" in the read-through I mention above, the actors pushing the chair encountered resistance due to the fact that Howarth was already sat on it. What started as an accident proved fruitful for the sequence appeared, almost unchanged, in the final production.

When I mentioned to Hunter, in an interview, that I had noticed how the rehearsals bore similarities with a devised theatre approach, he emphasised that "it [was] very deliberate" and "absolutely collaborative", adding that he envisaged his role as being "to provoke ... things, rather than to tell [the actors] what to do" ("Interview"). This idea of the collective, applied to a group of actors who did not necessarily know each other nor were all familiar with the work of Told by an Idiot, gains relevance when considering how Hunter seemed able to diffuse a trademark company "style", a dimension I will shortly return to, whilst nurturing this collaborative approach. In the context where *You Can't Take It With You* was produced, where authorship is often claimed by a directorial figure, Told by an Idiot displaced the question towards a (partially) shared authorial responsibility. In all publicity material for instance, the show is

attributed to the company, and not to Hunter solely.²¹⁶ In a way that echoes how the interdisciplinary approach held dear by Lambert-wild multiplied authorial voices, Told by an Idiot's emphasis on a collective and pragmatic process means that movement, as an underlying principle of "physical theatres", had appeared as a surprising alternative in the context where the production was created.

Commodifying "physical theatres" processes

The processes used by Told by an Idiot for this specific production propose an alternative to traditional rehearsal strategies. In this respect, they echo Lyn Gardner's analysis that "the fringe is infiltrating the mainstream on a scale not previously ... imagined" ("There Is Something Stirring" 12), making "Britain's theatre culture... fluid" (12).²¹⁷ However, there is also the risk in reverse for these alternative theatre-making strategies to become commodified, depending on the context where they are developed and the artists' agency over the process. Does a use of movement, as a core principle and as the starting point of the rehearsal process, suggest an alternative to traditional ways of making theatre, or does it feed into a process of absorption and commodification of these strategies?

I have previously explored how, through a collective and pragmatic approach to the script, the company had challenged traditional rehearsal

²¹⁶ In practical terms, Hunter was the only original company member present in the room during the rehearsal process. This idea that the work was generated by "the company" is matched by participants' accounts of the process, with Ridgeway for example using the term to describe her own position within it ("Hello"). This choice of terminology alongside the decision by many "physical theatres" makers to refer to themselves as a "company" is telling of a pre-supposed collaborative, horizontal approach to the work.

²¹⁷ This analysis is corroborated in the second edition of *Programme Notes*, with the editors specifying how "[t]he theatre landscape in the UK today is a much more complex ... ecosystem where large-scale venues and producers are increasingly engaging with experimental practices ..., and many independent artists are working on large-scale ... events." (Keidan and Mitchell 8)

techniques and proposed their signature approach. This also means that, from its early stages, the rehearsal *felt* like a Told by an Idiot's rehearsal. Indeed, it corresponded to expectations I had of the company's rehearsal processes, drawn on my own embodied experience of similar processes, as a "physical theatres" practitioner, and on my knowledge of some of their past productions. Of course, I do not suggest that because the process *felt* to me like it was illustrative of Told by an Idiot's rehearsals, it is how it was. I am especially indebted here again to Sarah Gorman, who, when commissioned to write about The New York City Players, found herself caught between the fact that "having already embarked upon a dialogue about the work" with the company's director, Richard Maxwell, she "felt [she] should view [it] with his words in mind" (6). While Maxwell had been reluctant to identify a specific style in his theatre, Gorman however "felt there *was* a recognisable style being used by his actors" (6). Whilst I did not feel a similar responsibility towards Hunter, not least because we only engaged in a conversation during the second part of the fieldwork,²¹⁸ similarly to Gorman, I had to work with the fact that I was recognising the company's "style" in the rehearsal process. The practical approach to the text, the collective dimension of the devising and perhaps more specifically the "furniture ballet", all contributed to creating this feeling of a company's signature "style". I have noted that not all the participants were familiar with Told by an Idiot's approach before the rehearsals started, and that there was such a thing as a "formula" the company used to work with actors unaccustomed with the company's specific processes. This also supposes that instead of being generated by the collective of performers

²¹⁸ I have already noted the difference between Hunter's reaction to my presence and the way I had been received by both Escale and Lambert-wild. It indeed felt that Hunter had approved for observers to sit in during rehearsals regardless of what these observers' intentions were. Whilst Hunter always proved very courteous and willing to discuss his work during an interview, most of our relationship during the rehearsals was distant.

and designers present in the room, many of the decisions informing the style - starting with the idea to have the furniture on wheels – were made before the rehearsals started.²¹⁹

There are, of course, many reasons that explain this decision, and there is little doubt that several can be attributed to the short production time allocated to Hunter. The company had to adapt to what Baz Kershaw names “the mechanisms of the market” (*Theatre Ecology* 159), an idea I will shortly return to. In these circumstances, these decisions were presumably made to assure the work was executed quickly and efficiently while retaining the idiosyncratic qualities the company had been chosen for, especially since *Told by an Idiot* were the ones who had approached the Royal Exchange to suggest a co-production (Carmichael “Interview”). Because the work was authored by *Told by an Idiot*, and because specific emphasis was placed on a collaborative approach, the company had to imprint on the work and on the process a mark that could be acknowledged as theirs. With a twenty year old history and several productions behind them, this is something that the company was presumably able to do rapidly. Given that the company had to work quickly, this use of a “formula” might also be part of the implicit assumption that, given the context, these stylistic decisions “would do”. As exemplified by Ridgeway’s comments, the process and these early stylistic decisions were deemed unusual and exceptional for the context they were used in. They were in this respect alternative *by default*, when they appeared formulaic to me, who was coming from an experimental theatre background

²¹⁹ This is confirmed by Ridgeway in her blog, who mentions the set on wheels on day 2 of the rehearsal period (“Hello”). The set was indeed already partially on wheels when I attended rehearsals on November 8.

The show in performance: responding to the “mechanisms of the market”.

The way the show was received corroborates this idea. Manchester’s Royal Exchange theatre programme is divided between productions of classics and “new writing” (“Mission Statement”). When *Told by an Idiot* were making *You Can’t Take It With You*, “physical theatres” productions were altogether absent from the programme. Audience members’ reactions the night I attended the performance highlighted that the show was perceived as alternative. Elements of the company’s style that would not have been exceptional for audiences familiar with devised theatre, as I was myself, most notably self-referentiality and instances of audience interactions, were commented on by surprised and excited audience members. These characteristics were precisely what several reviewers criticised, for the impression they gave that the company was trying too hard. *The Observer*’s Clare Brennan noted for example that elements of the performance belonged to “the sort of theatrical effect for which *Told by an Idiot* ... is justly lauded”, thus acknowledging a signature quality identifiable in the work, whilst however mentioning that “Paul Hunter’s ... overemphasis on audience contact breaks the spell ... and amplifies the creaks of this aged piece” (“Review”). Lyn Gardner similarly notes in *The Guardian* that “[e]verything is pitched a little too bright and big; too self-consciously zany and effortful, particularly in the attempts to break the fourth wall and involve the audience” (“*You Can’t Take It*”). What these comments underline is the way *Told by an Idiot*’s attempt to imprint their style onto the production, and to use techniques habitual of a devised theatre context, had actually appeared forced to me and to commentators familiar with their work, yet novel to audiences used to a more conservative programming. Both Brennan’s and Gardner’s comments highlight a

tension between the company's need to retain their "style", for it is what made them valuable in the context of the Royal Exchange, whilst conforming to the "mechanisms of the market" that demanded that an entertaining and original piece of theatre would be put together in little more than four weeks, after two short Research and Development periods.

Baz Kershaw's concept of "ecologies of theatre", as developed in *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* provides here an insightful frame of analysis to highlight how Told by an Idiot's "signature" devising strategies were commodified when put in practice in the context of the Royal Exchange. Kershaw understands "ecologies of theatre" as the fact that theatre exists within a wider "environment" and, as is the case in an ecosystem, influences as much as is influenced by all the other components of the system. Analysing the situation in 2007, Kershaw identifies "crises [that] were produced by an attempted "democratisation" of theatre through mechanisms of the market", with the reduction of state subsidy and the subsequent need for theatres to turn the work into products that need to be purchased by patrons.²²⁰ Kershaw argues that one consequence of this was to "giv[e] audiences, through their spending power, greater control over the national theatrical evolution" (*Theatre Ecology* 159). Kershaw acknowledges that such dynamics "partly undermined the types of elitism which were founded on a valorisation of "high art" traditions ... through the encouragement of populist theatre programming" (161). What he

²²⁰ The question of the "transformation" of audiences into "patrons" is not solely a characteristic of traditional theatre, although it might be the arena where it is the most obvious. Several independent theatre companies and institutions also operate on occasion according to these "mechanisms of the market", arguably essential to secure their economic survival. Examples of this can be seen in Kneehigh's strategies to attract patrons: for example, the most generous ones can become part of the "Kneehigh Family", a status that entitle them to "2 tickets for the annual Artistic Directors' cream tea" and their "favourite Kneehigh print, signed and framed" ("Kneehigh Family").

terms “consumerist populism” “democratise[d] access to the theatre while reducing the theatre’s potential for stimulating social critique and democratic debate” (161).²²¹

The fact that The Royal Exchange programmed *You Can’t Take It With You* as part of their festive season feeds into this process. As much as Told by an Idiot’s alternative status, in the context of The Royal Exchange, supposedly attracted an audience, it was also very unlikely that the production would do anything but reinforce the audience’s position as patrons purchasing a night of entertainment. Observing the reduction of audience engagement, while noting the increase of applause and the banality of standing ovations – albeit primarily in West End shows – Kershaw notes that such “reduction was integral to a theatre ecology that often discouraged democracy in the final two decades of the twentieth century” (*Theatre Ecology* 183). On the other hand, the increase in applause and standing ovations constitute a “shift” that, in the same ecological logic, “can be characterised as an evolutionary adaptation to an environment in which audiences were transmuted from *patrons*, to *clients*, to *customers*” (183). Kershaw furthers this noting that audiences “increasingly were prevented from becoming unruly” (184).²²²

If we are to follow this argument and consider the ways these processes “indicate an intensifying acquiescence in audiences, an increasingly pervasive relinquishing of cultural power” (183), how then can Told by an Idiot’s attempts at breaking the fourth wall be read? Whilst they might have challenged expectations of most audience members on a formal level, they did very little to

²²¹ Gay McAuley highlights a similar process of “marketisation”, mentioning specifically the consumption of food and drinks: “[t]he effect is to signal very clearly that theatre is part of the leisure industry, and what is being sold is a good night out” (*Space* 61).

²²² It is an altogether different stance that is adopted in more experimental contexts, where audience are increasingly invited to participate and reflect on their position.

invite the audience to reflect on their situation. Arguably, *Told by an Idiot*, given their “alternative” status in the context of *The Royal Exchange*, were in an excellent position to further the challenge they had already provided on a formal level. The other side of the coin is that they presumably were the least best equipped to do so, given their already “marginal” position in this context.

The politics of the play further contributed to making the show non-confrontational. While the Sycamore/Vanderhof family illustrates a critique of the capitalism of the time, the alternative it proposes consists mostly of individualistic hedonism, with little actual reflection on the social and political consequences of either. The idea promoted by the show and encapsulated by the patriarch Martin Vanderhof’s discourse to banker Kirby is that work is detrimental to one’s physical and psychological well-being and that state-led initiatives might go against individuals’ desires, hence his celebration of tax evasion. Such a hedonistic, individualistic message is more likely to comfort audiences in their position as “customers” who have made the right decision when deciding to spend money on “a good night out”, in McAuley’s terms (*Space* 61), than challenge them in considering what the political implications of the show might be, along with their own position in the “purchasing” of this performance. *Told by an Idiot*’s “physical theatres” approach did not work as an embodied tool for the building of a community of spectators, instead thematically reinforcing an individualistic perspective. I will shortly examine how their use of movement in the performance had a similar effect on a somatic level.

Whilst I do not suggest that to stage a radical political play would have necessarily been the answer, it seems that to equate entertainment with a lack of

political implications contributes to furthering a logic of the merchandisation of “alternative” theatre-making techniques as a popular marketable style.²²³ In this respect, it runs the risk of fuelling what Kershaw terms “an increasing severance [of audiences] from the wider environment (cultural, political, ecological) as a critical flexibility of response [is] discouraged” (184), a feature that in turn contains the risk of “produc[ing] a political weakening of audiences and, by extension, the communities from which they were drawn” (184).

The pitfalls of naturalism

Whilst it is valuable that a company like Told by an Idiot, working in a part of the theatre industry that places emphasis on devising strategies, should be included in a more traditional context such as The Royal Exchange, their production of *You Can't Take It With You* illustrates nonetheless an absorption and arguably a dissolution of alternative and potentially subversive practices. Whilst the creative process had retained an alternative quality in this context, suggesting different ways of making theatre, the “style” of the company became commodified in performance. This feature is particularly apparent in the company’s compliance with a traditional approach to casting, something that is uncharacteristic of their process. In most of Told by an Idiot’s productions, performers are cast with no concerns for a naturalistic association between the

²²³ The question of whether it is ever possible to combine an interrogation of audiences’ position as “customers” with a piece of work that is also entertaining, especially when the work is performed in a high profile venue, is always problematic. Complicite’s decision to directly address the audience of the Barbican Theatre, during *Master and Margarita*, and highlight their position as patrons seemed very clumsily made. The night I attended the show, on March 31st 2012, spectators seemed mostly bemused and aware of the irony of being pointed as customers when having paid, for some of them, up to £42 for their “good night out”. On the other hand, Nic Green’s *Trilogy*, when performed in the same space in January 2010, had the most expensive tickets capped at £15. The political content of Green’s show was matched by a more democratic access.

character's and the performer's physical appearance. Children are played by adults, men are played by women and women by men: any actor can play any character regardless of their age, gender or race. Carmichael attributes this decision first to "necessity", asking: "how do we tell a story when there's only a few of us here?" She also states that it seems absurd to cast characters and performers accordingly, "as if a twenty something woman would only ever play a twenty something woman, as opposed to thinking: OK, now I'm a grandmother, now I'm a baby, now I'm a donkey... Whatever it is to tell the story" ("Interview").

This is not however the way the company operated when casting *You Can't Take It With You*. They instead complied with traditional casting processes, presumably imposed by The Royal Exchange, with one concession being that a few actors impersonated several characters instead of only embodying one, a decision that again, appeared to me as a trope of devised theatre and of the company's style. The naturalistic style of the play – albeit, as noted before, interspaced with instances of self-referential humour and audience participation – implied that actors were cast according to the physical descriptions of the characters they were embodying. This means that the young Alice Sycamore was impersonated by a woman in her twenties, and that her grandfather was indeed played by an actor in his seventies (Christopher Benjamin). Perhaps more disturbingly, it also implies that Rheba, the one and only maid of the family, was cast according to her description in the original script - the piece is set in the United States, in the 1930s. Described as "a colored maid ... somewhere in her thirties" (*You Can't Take It With You* 123), she was played by a Black actress (Golda Rosheuvel), and her companion, Donald,

described as “a colored man of no uncertain hue” (129) by a Black actor (Denton Chikura). It is worth mentioning that these descriptions were edited out of the script the company used in rehearsal, for their evident racist undertones. Nevertheless, the two Black performers in *Told by an Idiot’s* production were cast for the roles on the (only) lower-class Black characters. The “mechanisms of the market” identified by Kershaw and that dictated a naturalistic approach to casting and to performing, as a dominant form of performance in UK text-based or traditional theatre, meant that the ethical and political implications of these decisions were avoided.

I am not suggesting that the company made these decisions based on racist grounds; rather, that they were operating within a context that favours a realistic style of performance sometimes accompanied by problematic ethical consequences. Paradoxically however, *Told by an Idiot’s* characteristic approach also proved redemptive for this casting decision. One of the key, trademark features of the piece was the fact that some of the performers were cast for several roles – a technique characteristic of *Told by an Idiot’s* processes. Both Rosheuvél and Chikura, along with two other actors, were thus cast for other parts, for which the actors’ ethnic background did not matter. This double casting provided *Told by an Idiot* with an opportunity to subtly subvert more traditional casting decisions. It indeed emphasised that, despite conforming to the original script to cast the roles of Rheba and Donald, other roles were attributed regardless of the way the characters were described in the original. Thus, Rosheuvél also impersonated an actress and Chikura a tax officer. *Told by an Idiot’s* alternative casting decision, characteristic of their “physical theatres”

processes, operated as redemptive of the more traditional casting tradition it cohabited with in the piece.

Focusing on the specific case of *You Can't Take It With You*, and on a close analysis of the ways the company had integrated their devising processes in a traditional context, underlines how Told by an Idiot's work with movement and on a collaborative approach, as core aesthetic and practical principles, suggests their "physical theatres" provide an alternative model for making theatre. Because it had overturned conventional approaches to creating a show from a script, this process has acquired a gently subversive dimension, on a formal level. In performance, Told by an Idiot's "style" was perceived as alternative by some audience members, who were presumably unfamiliar with "physical theatres". However, to commentators familiar with the company's work and/or with "physical theatres" devising processes, as I was myself, the production seemed formulaic. In this respect, while Told by an Idiot suggests alternative ways of experiencing theatre to audiences used to a traditional context, the slippage of their "fringe" approach into a more mainstream context means that they complied with the rules of such context, with little or no room left to subvert them.

"Theatre should be unreliable"

I have examined how the decision by Told by an Idiot to work in a rather conservative context when creating *You Can't Take It With You* had made the production formulaic, in that it reflected their idiosyncratic style but did so in a way that also commodified it. I concentrate now on examining the effects of Told by an Idiot's "physical theatres" on challenging notions of intimacy through

their use of sets and through the way they put spaces in movement, to determine whether their “physical theatres” could constitute embodied tools for an alternative experience of performance. The set of *You Can’t Take It With You*, put on wheels, and the idiosyncratic performance space of The Royal Exchange, in the round, were used in combination so as to build the “unreliable” theatre the company is interested in constructing. Doing so also meant infusing movement into the show’s presentational spaces, challenging boundaries between interior and exterior, the hidden and the visible. In the following section, I use the term “unreliable” in the sense Hunter intended when talking about their work (“Interview”): theatre that highlights the craft, reveals the mechanisms; theatre that *cannot be trusted*.

Spaces in motion

It is telling that the furniture composing the set of *You Can’t Take It With You* should have been put on wheels from the beginning of the rehearsal process. It complies in this respect with one of Told by an Idiot’s trademark stylistic features, and feeds into the company’s ethos of making “unreliable” theatre. Since their first productions, Told by an Idiot has sought for their sets a capacity for “transformation” (Hunter, “Interview”). Carmichael explains that this characteristic comes from the early days of the company, when sets needed to fulfil several scenographic functions but also had to be easily transportable. Carmichael sees this practical necessity as what “lent [the company] an invention” now characteristic of their performance style (“Interview”). Recent Told by an Idiot’s productions are thus characterised by these versatile sets: *The Dark Philosophers* develops around a stage filled with chests and wardrobes,

items of furniture that “become a landscape” (Hunter, “Interview”) mirroring the Welsh Valleys where the stories take place. The set of *And The Horse You Rode In On* becomes versatile thanks to sheets of fabric that in turn hide or reveal the furniture, and by a system of spaces – a changing room is revealed behind a piece of fabric - imbricated one into another. This versatility means the sets are suffused by a sense of movement that is thematically reverberated in the shows: it is matched by the way fictional spaces are represented and presentational spaces experienced by the performers. The coal pit in *The Dark Philosophers*, for example, is not represented vertically, with the performers lowering themselves from a raised platform, but on a horizontal plane. Having changed the angle of perspective, the performers’ physicality conveys nonetheless a sense of effortful descent, through the way their tense muscles and short breath are experienced by the audience. On a somatic level, the performers’ physicality, a trope of the “physical theatres” that abound in the UK context, creates a sense of place.

You Can’t Take It With You was conceived to specifically respond to the specificities of the Royal Exchange’s main performance space. The Royal Exchange has the “largest theatre in the round in Britain”, “in which the stage area is surrounded on all sides, and above, by seating” (Royal Exchange website). Told by an Idiot took this element into account when they incorporated heights in their staging. The homemade firework display organised by Paul Sycamore (played by Sam Parks), and represented in the space by loud explosions and bright flickering lights, happens on the ceiling, above the heads of spectators sat at stage level, but almost at eye level for the ones in the top seats. These examples show how Told by an Idiot’s theatre plays with shifting viewpoints and perspectives. The fact that the set is put on wheels operates at a

similar level, and furthers this specificity. It is “unreliable” in the way it highlights the craft that goes into the making of the presentational space – elements of the set are for example wheeled in at the start of the show, one after the other, on cue for when they are needed – but also in the way it injects an imbalance in the whole set, on a very literal level. This is best exemplified when the character Gay Wellington, who is heavily inebriated, appears: not only does she stumble across the stage, but the furniture she desperately tries to hold on to is inherently unstable and follows her movements. The imbalanced state this character is in is reflected and physically enacted by the unreliably mobile furniture. For one instant, the audience shifts from being omniscient to seeing the room through this character’s eyes. Space is made unreliable because it is in movement.²²⁴

Such a change of perspective does not operate on a visual level solely. Setting the sets in motion and injecting a sense of “unreliability” into the presentational spaces means an experience of the characters’ situation is “viscerally perceive[d]” (Tait 141) by the audience. The fact, analysed by Tait, that “[a]ction is remembered as it is performed” supposes that experiences of similar lived actions, such as losing one’s balance, are performed through an “activation of [the actors’] somatic memory”. This in turn “implicates this potential in a spectator” (147), for whom a similar “activation” is at work. Through this process of making spaces mobile, *Told by an Idiot* temporarily include audiences on an intimate and somatic level. However, as I will show,

²²⁴ Through a similar use of physicality, time is stretched or shortened. This idea will not be expanded upon here, for it goes beyond the limitations of this thesis; however, it is important to note this effect in passing for the way it also contributes to shifting perspectives and audience’s ways of experiencing theatre physically. These characteristics also highlight a cinematic dimension of the company’s work, and a subsequent play with audience’s experience, with close-up, flashbacks, slowing down or fast forward effects.

because this is part of a performance that does not further such dissolution of boundaries between self and other, and, instead, comforts audience's individuality, it becomes mostly imoperative. Additionally, in Noland's terms, these "gestures" are "the means by which cultural conditioning is ... embodied", but unlike in Noland's example of the graffiti writer imprinting signs on a wall, this conditioning is not "put to the test" (2). Whilst the movement vocabularies chosen by Told by an Idiot enable an embodied sense of sameness, they do not disrupt or challenge expectations and do not open a space for a subversive experience to arise.

Surprises

The "unreliable" nature of the spaces presented on stage is also provoked by what I call *surprises*. The fabricated, crafted nature of theatre is underlined by playful interactions with props and with the sets. The drunken Wellington, frightened and embarrassed by her own inebriated state, eventually hides underneath a side table, her body concealed by the hanging sides of the tablecloth, with the exception of one of her legs. The scene ends on this image, and intermission follows. When the audience return to their seats for the second half of the show, Wellington's leg is still apparent from underneath the side table. However, the family's maid Rheba, also played by Roshevel, appears on stage and, at the end of the scene, exits, having taken with her the leg that is then revealed as being a mannequin's, in a comical meta-theatrical divulcation of the trick.

This playful dialectic relationship between the hidden and the shown invests spaces with a sense of uncertainty and unreliability, and blurs the

boundary between exterior and interior by placing props that are external to the fiction, and only serve a meta-theatrical purpose, in the presentational and the fictional spaces. The surprises contained within the sets, already present in the “presentational space”, acknowledge the self-referential quality of the work: this is theatre; as stated by Hunter, the company does not intend to put reality on stage (“Interview”). But whilst this is not exceptional in a devised theatre context, the fact that these props are literally kept under the surface suggests both a dynamic dimension of the presentational spaces, and a sense of instability. McAuley’s application to the stage of Bachelard’s analysis of caskets as “very evident witnesses of the *need for secrecy*, of an intuitive sense of hiding places” (*Poetics* 81), provides here again a useful framework with which to analyse this quality of Told by an Idiot’s sets. McAuley argues that the stage functions in a way similar to Bachelard’s casket, characterised by a “complex dialectic between inside and outside, hidden and revealed, given and withheld” (74). The theatre, in McAuley’s analysis, “has a psychic function that is analogous”, for it “is constantly playing with the possibilities of revelation, with the relationship between the shown and the not-shown, the shown and the partially shown” (75). McAuley furthers the analogy by suggesting that such dynamics are especially true in the case of the “curtained stage”, for the way it “provoke[s] a sense of anticipation” by materialising “yet another threshold” (75). In her argumentation, the stage, hidden behind the curtain, evoking how it can be revealed, operates within the theatre building like Russian dolls. McAuley evocatively suggests that the last one might be where the most important secret lies.²²⁵ These

²²⁵ Bachelard argues that where the lock might simply arouse one’s curiosity, “boxes that fit into one another” can hold secrets better: “rather than challenge the trespasser, rather than frighten him by signs of power, it is preferable to mislead him. This is where boxes that fit into one

considerations on the curtained stage take here a novel dimension when set against the “curtains” that the tablecloth hiding Rosheuvel’s body echo. Not only does it operate like the curtain that conceals the stage, playing with possibilities of revelations: it does so whilst the performance has started already. This also constitutes a trademark of Told by an Idiot’s style. In *The Farenheit Twins*, props are hidden in cavities concealed in the snow-coloured furry material that covers the set, while *And The Horse You Rode In On* opens with the set covered in large white sheets that reveal, when taken away, that an actor had been hiding under them for the first few minutes of the performance. In all these examples, the set functions as somewhere that hides *surprises* and evokes the possibility of other, deeper secrets. These dialectics of the hidden and the shown contribute to shifting and displacing the perspective, and to making boundaries between openness and closure porous.

The fact that there is, embedded in these sets, so much potential for discoveries and for surprises contributes to making these presentational spaces, and by thematic contagion, the fictional places they depict, unstable. They are always potentially in movement, as epitomised by the set put on wheels. The sets of Told by an Idiot’s productions, seemingly ready to crack open at any time and produce secrets that were kept hidden, participate in a dynamics that makes the presentational spaces of the show unstable, redefining notions of secrecy, and proposing a re-assessment of intimacy. In this respect, they operate like Escale’s caravans: they open up and produce secrets suddenly visible to all, yet suggesting the possibility of other, deeper secrets. In *Theatre Ecology*, Kershaw argues for an analysis of “theatre’s response to the ecological world beyond its walls

another come in. The least important secrets are put in the first box, the idea being that they will suffice to satisfy his curiosity” (82).

through the ways it stage[s] domestic spaces” (64), further stating that the “central convention” represented by “the room” functions as “a sign for civilisation” (67) and that, as such, it might tell something of the societies it metaphorically evokes. Kershaw does not solely focus on “rooms” onstage that depict fictional ones; he also include a short passage on the bigger room that the theatre building itself encloses, examining its revolutions over the course of the twentieth century as ways to always “better represent the very form and distorting pressures of the times” (65). The set of *You Can’t Take It With You* participates in these dynamics of “unreliability”. In this respect, these “physical theatres” provide, in the context of the Royal Exchange, a commentary on the way “physical theatres”’s focus on movement, as a core creative principle, can suggest a sense of uncertainty in relation to the perceived stability of the domestic space, and by extension, of the theatre space it is represented in. Viewing *Told by an Idiot*’s use of movement through a perspective informed by dance ethnography highlights what Novack calls the “far-reaching implications”, on a social and cultural level, of the “movement experiences, body images, and conceptions of body, self and motion” (*Sharing the Dance* 150) that movement enables. In this case however, whilst the unreliable nature of the sets thematically questions the integrity of the theatre space, the commodification of the “physical theatres” devices used by the company fail to challenge cultural and economic expectations.

Making mistakes

The “physical theatres” of *Told by an Idiot* inject movement into the presentational spaces and therefore infect the fictional spaces with a sense of

unsettling unreliability. Tellingly, the company associates the “unreliable” quality of their theatre with a sense of spontaneity, another trope of devised theatre. The term appears throughout the company’s website and in their artistic statements. Carmichael, in an interview with Lyn Gardner, defines this notion in these words:

[t]heatre should be instinctive, but the way it is made often prevents that. Maybe when you're on stage, you are spontaneous and living in the moment, but to get to that point often involves months of planning and weeks of rehearsal. The ways you have to work to make a piece of theatre make you conform. But you have to fight against it. (“Why Casanova”)

This idea is shared by much devised “physical theatres” companies: Heddon and Milling include “spontaneity” as one of the “soundbites” they provide to exemplify what devised theatres are (4), and it reverberates with similar notions of “trust”, “sincerity”, “authenticity”, “intuition”, and so on” (Govan et al. 30). Told by an Idiot’s interest in the spontaneous coincides with their intention of “explor[ing] the human condition” (Website). In the following section, I explore how the company use “mistakes” in *You Can’t Take It With You* as a means of highlighting a sense of “spontaneity” and their idiosyncratic style, yet in a way that fails to unsettle the context where these mistakes are staged.

The “furniture ballet” that opens the piece is one example of such staged “spontaneity”. Evidently choreographed, the scene is satisfyingly swift and slick. However, when the sequence ends and each performer is about to exit the stage,

the smoothness of the ballet is undermined by a simultaneous motion from each of the actors who all either collide with or nearly knock over one of the items of furniture they have so carefully and effortlessly arranged around the room. The potential for catastrophe opens a crack in the slick surface of the performance, sending the message that the actors, however skilled, are “human after all”. The flawed equates here with the authentic, and the human with what is slightly imperfect, contradictory. In an article titled “Cultures of Musical Failures”, musicologist and historian Francesca Brittan traces the roots of this idea back to the folk movement initiated in the 1930s. She sees how it subsequently gave rise to the emergence and proliferation of the blues and folk revivals of the 1960s on the one hand, and the punk movement in the 1980s on the other. Brittan analyses how at the beginning of the folk movement, anti-virtuosity was equated with the idea of a “genuine” sound. She identifies a similar perspective in contemporary musical performances, citing examples where failure is regarded as “a signal of inclusiveness, accessibility and even sincerity” (115). Brittan identifies how this taste for failure continues in the 21st century, stating that “[s]uccess has become generic – and failure ... may also reach this point. ... But at the moment, it still offers us breathing room; it still admits the possibility of the idiosyncratic, the weird” (129).



Figure 15 - *You Can't Take It With You*. The “furniture ballet”. Photo by John Keenan

Told by an Idiot’s acknowledgement of the possibility of failure illustrates this trend. However, in their case, it is orchestrated, fabricated. If this goes hand in hand with their intention to stage the craft that goes into their work, through unreliable spaces for instance. It also highlights an understated assumption that it constitutes one characteristic of their specific, alternative style. In this respect, their construction and choreography of failure recall what Brittan analyses in folk and punk movements as the blurring of the line “between intentional and accidental failure – the genuine and the disingenuous” (127) that lead the idiosyncratic, the “non-virtuosic” to subsequently be “produced consciously as a commodity” (127). While this endeavour contributes to creating an “unreliable” theatre, that is “a space that allows for the interrogation of human precariousness and instability” (Brittan 129), activated through the use of an “unreliable” set, it nevertheless adds to the commodification of devised performance as a genre, and of Told by an Idiot’s style as a formula for, paradoxically, the success of their display of failure.

Sara Jane Bailes argues in her astute *Poetics of Failure*, that “[f]ailure challenges the cultural dominance of instrumental rationality and the fictions of continuity that bind the way we imagine and manufacture the world” (2). Bailes argues that “increasingly a discourse of failure in art practice has mapped a vibrant counter-cultural space of alternative and often critical articulation” (2). Bailes’ examples – Forced Entertainment, Goat Island and Elevator Repair Service – are very different from the one I focus on here. Nevertheless, her analysis provides insightful parallels with how *Told by an Idiot* uses mistakes, in the way she examines instances where they are constructed and consciously made a part of the performance. Bailes analyses that mistakes operate as “broken moments” (99) and that as such they “foreground a radical potential inherent within the labour of all live performance: that is, theatre’s facility as “live” action to de-compose and reauthenticate before us” (99). Bailes also very clearly states that “discourse of failure as reflected in Western art and literature undermines the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology’s preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed, or win” (2).

This claim is particularly interesting when paired with Bailes’ idea that “[m]ost conventional theatre ... labours precisely to conceal this vulnerability and to avoid the incidence of rupture or loss of control as a potentially transgressive moment” (99). The rupture of the “furniture ballet” can be seen as transgressive in that it goes against this dominant effort to conceal the craft. However, when in Bailes’ analysis, “broken moments” “remind us that theatre’s liveness ... is intrinsically unreliable” (99), the “furniture ballet” is so evidently well-rehearsed – all the performers make the same “mistake” simultaneously - there seems to be little room for “rupture or loss of control”. The mistake

highlights that the performers are reliable in the way they perform “unreliability”. That Forced Entertainment, to borrow Bailes’ example, shall rehearse the failures inherent to their shows does not prevent them from creating an unpredictable environment. Scenes like Cathy Naden’s enraged outburst at a fellow performer in *The Coming Storm* (2012), after he made the mistake of telling elements of a story they had agreed not to reveal, creates the feeling that anything could happen. Despite the fact that the scene had presumably been rehearsed, it infuses the room with a sense of risk: because there are no hints as to whether Naden’s anger is real or not, and because the outburst is not expected. In *You Can’t Take It With You* however, the mistake simply highlights that the audience are “in safe hands”: the mistake is a surprise, but its choreographed quality inscribes it in the continuity of the “ballet”, there is no rupture between the two. In this respect, the mistake has entered a process of commodification closer to the one Brittan analyses than to the effects described by Bailes. As much as it functions as what Brittan identifies as “anti-virtuosity”, that is “the human, the flawed” (126), it stands out against what Bailes calls the labour of conventional theatre “to conceal ... vulnerability” (99). On the other hand, its evident choreographed nature underlines how “it [is] also produced consciously as a commodity” (Brittan 127). In this respect, it does not “undermine the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology” (Bailes 2) and its focus on achievement. Instead, it succeeds in failing very well.

The implications of this are multiple, especially given failure’s position as a trope of “physical theatres”. Complying with displaying what is expected of “physical theatres”, that is: a human, spontaneous, authentic and flawed dimension, the mistake at the end of the “furniture ballet” contributes to a

commodification of the idiosyncratic more than it suggests alternative ways of making or of experiencing theatre. Indeed, unlike the way a company such as Forced Entertainment uses mistakes and “amateurism” as what Bailes terms a “crafted tactics of displacement ... [that] destabilizes conventional modes of practice and spectatorship, forcing entertainment to become politically reinvested as a cultural practice” (107), the use of a mistake here reinforces “conventional modes of practice” and “conventional modes of ... spectatorship”. In the case of Forced Entertainment for example, the irruption of an unpredictable element to the performance – whether rehearsed or not – triggers strong somatic reactions, not dissimilar to the ones identified by Tait in audience members witnessing dangerous aerial acts. Tait argues that audience members “will “catch” the aerial body with his or her senses in mimicry of flying” (141). She adds that “at issue is the extent to which a spectator viscerally perceives the physicality of another body (or bodies) in a process of oscillating identification and disidentification with its cultural identity” (141). The sense of danger, almost panic that submerged me during Cathy Naden’s angry outburst, or the idea that a performance makes one “cringe”, are sensory and sensual reactions to performance that are very physically experienced. Seeing a three meters high column of props collapse, as in Camille Boitel’s *L’Immédiat*, takes very literally audience members’ breath away, in a very audible fashion: the whole room gasps as one. In the case of the “furniture ballet” however, if there is gasping, it is more because of the effect of surprise than because of any felt sense of danger and potential for catastrophe. Tait further suggests that “to effect a change in patterns of social relationships ... might require unfolding bodily disruptions of kinetic cultural orientations”, adding that “[c]hallenges to embodied dominance might

need sensory and visceral as well as ideological configuration” (150). In this respect, Tait joins Bailes’ idea of a “tactics of displacement”, albeit from a phenomenological and sensory perspective. This is precisely what Told by an Idiot’s staged mistake does not achieve. On the contrary, the end of the “furniture ballet” does not disrupt “kinetic cultural orientations” (Tait 150), in that it reinforces the idea that both performers and the audience are in safe hands. There is indeed very little risk of physical or emotional injury. When “physical theatres” can provide tools for a subversive dimension to be embodied and experienced on a somatic level, Told by an Idiot’s strategies comply with what is expected of them as *alternative* theatre-makers within a conservative context. The company do what they know how to do, and break the slick surface of the performance because it is entertaining without providing a chance to reflect on the political implications of attending a performance.

Conclusive remarks

Movement and physicality occupy preponderant positions in the work of Told by an Idiot, as processual, aesthetic or thematic elements. The prevalence of movement in the company’s processes means that, when re-located within a more traditional context, their approach – to the text, to collaboration, to the collective, to directing, ... - was informed by movement. In such context, movement, as both a devising approach and as one of the fundamentals of the company’s philosophy, suggests an alternative to conventional means of making performance, yet runs the risk of being commodified.

The relationship between movement and spaces in the company's work, and in particular in the company's use of stage design, contributes to making their theatre "unreliable" and to challenge expectations regarding theatre space. Surprises and secrets are revealed, in a way that challenges boundaries between the outside and the inside. They also enable a shift of perspective that contains the potential to challenge boundaries, on a somatically experienced level. However, in the case of *You Can't Take It With You*, the movement vocabularies that the company utilise do not challenge or subvert expectations. Complying with expected representations, they comfort audiences in a comfortable somatic experience instead of positioning them in a practice of spectatorship. Their potentially subversive use of physicality is undermined by the decision to comply with elements of staged "spontaneity", through the use of failure for instance. This particular element encapsulates how, in the process of making a show within a traditional context, with a limited timeframe and more importantly, where being a devised theatre company seemed to be alternative *enough*, the company's processes have become commodified.

I stated in the Introduction to this thesis that "physical theatres" had benefited, in the UK, from a wide visibility over the past few years. The example of this collaboration between Told by an Idiot and The Royal Exchange underlines that, if there is still a reluctance from traditional institutions, as perceived by Carmichael ("Interview"), these "physical theatres" are more and more visible, a fact also acknowledged in recent commentaries about the porosity of boundaries between "the theatrical "mainstream" and artists from the independent sector" (Keidan and Mitchell 7). However, it is in this case a double-edged sword, for the dissemination of "physical theatres" processes and

idiosyncracies can be used in a way that commodifies them and annihilate their potential for subversion. In this respect and in this context, the “physical theatres” of Told by an Idiot have failed at providing an embodied tool for an alternative experience of spectatorship. Their “physical theatres” strategies might have questioned boundaries between interior and exterior, and challenged notions of intimacy on a somatic level, they have not seized this opportunity to allow their audience to question their status and position as customers, and have not in this respect provided tools for a renewed experience of theatre.

CHAPTER 6:

BEING HUMAN: LITTLE BULB THEATRE'S "GENTLE" SUBVERSION IN OPERATION GREENFIELD

"Human-scale is one of the most generous things that dance can offer an audience."

Jonathan Burrows (*A Choreographer's Handbook* 203)

Human-scale might also be one of the most generous things that "physical theatres" can offer an audience. These words by dancer and choreographer Jonathan Burrows seem an opportune epigraph for the work of Little Bulb Theatre. Whereas *Told by an Idiot* seek to create a theatre that is "bigger than life", Little Bulb Theatre are "committed to developing devised and physical theatre performances which explore and illuminate minute human details that, in a world so big, are easily swallowed up" ("Little Bulb"). Like Burrows, Little Bulb Theatre strive to create work on a "human-scale": work that is accessible and expresses something of a shared humanity between audiences and performers. Making work that is generous, earnest and entertaining, yet challenging and emotionally demanding, the company uses physicality as a means to coin alternative modes of narration, and offer an experience of performance that operates on a human and humane level. This idea of a shared humanity is similar to the one developed by both Brittan and Bailes: it is both the idea of belonging to an extended community, to have compassion, and to

experience the flawed and the contradictory as parts and as signs of human nature.

The company was founded in 2008 by Clare Beresford, Dominic Conway, Alexander Scott and Shamira Turner, who met while studying at the University of Kent, Canterbury. Committed to creating work that is experimental yet entertaining, Little Bulb Theatre use a variety of formats.: from pieces that are entirely co-devised, with no directorial figure, to shows that are more straightforwardly theatrical – and that often experiment with the medium – performed in theatre spaces and directed by the company’s artistic director Alexander Scott. The former are usually constructed so as to allow room for improvisation and foster audience participation. *Sporadical* (2009) and *The Marvellous and Unlikely Fete of Little Upper Downing* (2010-2011), along with the various cabaret acts the company has initiated, belong to this category. The band experiment *Goose Party* (2011-2012) or *The Album Project* (“In Development” 2014) push this tendency to new limits and illustrate the company’s ongoing experiments with music-making. The latter category of work includes the company debut *Crocospia* (2008), *Squally Showers* (2013), their homage to dance theatre, *Orpheus* (2013-2014), devised for the Battersea Arts Centre’s Grand Hall, and *Operation Greenfield* (2010-2012), the focus of this chapter. These shows were entirely devised by the company, with Scott working as a dramaturg and a director. Music has so far been a central dimension of the company’s work, and a creative impulse in the devising process: *Sporadical* is a self-branded “epic folk opera”, *Operation Greenfield* is about a band, and the performers trained in gypsy jazz and opera for *Orpheus*. Little Bulb Theatre also experiment with ways of integrating music into theatrical aesthetics. Whilst in a

traditional musical, songs are used to illustrate narrative content, in Little Bulb Theatre's work they are an integral part of the fiction.

Told by an Idiot could be placed on an informal family tree alongside companies such as Improbable or Kneehigh. Little Bulb Theatre can be included in this informal lineage: they are the generation of practitioners descended from these companies, some of which have inspired Little Bulb Theatre's artistic world. Trends can be identified between the work of Kneehigh and Improbable, for instance, and the work of Little Bulb Theatre: an emphasis on narratives, storytelling, and on low-production aesthetics coupled with an abundance of props.²²⁶ The fact that these trends are contemporary to one another, and that Little Bulb Theatre may have not been in direct contact with these companies before being themselves a professional company, simply suggests the existence of transversal inspirations. In the context of this thesis, Little Bulb Theatre provide a valuable counterpart and parallel to the example of Told by an Idiot. The company's reputation has grown over the course of this research, starting as a small-scale, "fringe" theatre company, which had become fully established at the time of writing. Little Bulb Theatre belong to a generation of practitioners alongside Action Hero, Made in China, The Paper Cinema and the artists represented, produced and supported by Andy Field and Deborah Pearson's Forest Fringe. The company's ongoing relationship with the Battersea Arts

²²⁶ The Kneehigh band simply corroborates such analogy between the two companies. Improbable share similar low-key aesthetics: the puppets made of newspapers and sticky tape in *Satyagraha* (2010) find an echo in Little Bulb Theatre's cardboard puppets in *Sporadical*, charity shop vinyls in *Crocoshmia* or pound shop props in *Operation Greenfield*. The economic and political implications of these artistic decisions are worth highlighting for the way they negotiate with and, especially in the case of Improbable, disrupt expectations that equate high-profile productions with the consumption on the one hand, and the production on the other, of money. In the case of Improbable however, the ecological and financial cost of using extraordinary amounts of sticky tape per performance paradoxically contradicted the initial impulse, as noted by Nesreen Nabil Hussein in a discussion on the company's use of objects.

Centre also contributed to inscribing them in a lineage of experimental performance and theatre-makers that share touring networks, festivals, and often an economic and social status. However, Little Bulb Theatre's recent *Orpheus* on the one hand, and the fact that a lot of the company's work has been seen as widely accessible on the other hand, mean that Little Bulb Theatre have reached a more visible position than these other experimental companies. Focusing on Little Bulb Theatre thus opens perspectives on the wider British theatre industry and highlights, from a practitioner's perspective, how "physical theatres" can, in this context, provide alternative ways of experiencing performance.

Operation Greenfield, the second of Little Bulb Theatre's shows directed by Scott, is described by the company as "a bizarre and visually fantastical exploration of faith and friendship" (Website). The devising process spanned a year, concentrated over condensed periods of time. The show tells the story of four Christian teenagers – three Anglicans and a newly arrived French Catholic - who form a folk rock band and enter their village's annual talent competition. In *Operation Greenfield*, movement and physicality are used in a way that challenges distinctions between the spaces at work in theatre. Through this work on physicality, the company suggests a way of experiencing performance that is "gently subversive". In this chapter, I first examine how the theatrical spaces are concertinaed in *Operation Greenfield*, blurring distinctions between what McAuley has termed "presentational" and "fictional" spaces. I also advance that our knowledge of the piece's physical score enabled us to acquire a "spatial capital", highlighting how the way space is experienced, from a practitioner's point of view, challenges conceptions of embodied intimacy. In the second section, I examine the relationship between music and physicality, focusing on

the way music is used as a soundtrack to map out fictional intimate realms, and analysing how it shapes the physical score of the performers. Music is also examined as a physical endeavour: I suggest that singing and the playing of an instrument impact on the performers' physicality, thus advocating for music-making to be considered as a physical practice that shapes the performers' physicality. In the last section, I analyse how Little Bulb Theatre's physicality is "non/virtuosic", a term I define as being the virtuosic execution of non-virtuosic movement. Drawing on a scholarship that examines non-virtuosity and amateurism, I recalibrate notions of earnestness and explore how non/virtuosic physicality suggests alternative ways of experiencing movement in performance. In this respect, the company propose a physicality that is virtuosic on a "human-scale", and coin "physical theatres" that offer an embodied experience that can be "gently subversive".

Methodology

As I stated in the Introduction to this thesis, this case study is intrinsically distinct from the ones I have focused on so far. Being a member of the company, my relationship with Little Bulb Theatre is inherently different. The role I have played as co-devisor and performer in *Operation Greenfield* – and in prior and subsequent productions – has shaped my knowledge of and relationship with the UK theatre context. It has also informed my perspectives on the renewal of the British "physical theatres" scene, and on similar endeavours taking place on the other side of the Channel. Thus, my participation in Little Bulb Theatre as a French practitioner crystallises the research questions that inform this thesis. It accounts for the process of *alienation* I advocate as a methodological framework:

looking at the familiar with “foreign” eyes, and at the alien with familiarity. In this respect, I draw again on Novack who acknowledges how, in studying contact improvisation by taking part in contact improvisations events, “[t]he experience of doing the form unexpectedly changed the way I danced and altered my understanding of movement” (19). Likewise, my relationship with the material I examine here – and with all movement I experience nowadays as either a practitioner, or an audience member, is deeply embedded in an embodied understanding of what performed movement is.

My position as an active participant in this specific case study allows an analysis of the piece from the inside. In this respect, my analysis is necessarily informed by the deep friendship and trust that connects me to each one of the company members and to Little Bulb Theatre as a whole. This is not without problems with regard to objectivity. Having myself never been a spectator of *Operation Greenfield*, my account of our work is necessarily incomplete. The knowledge I have of the piece has grown over the course of two years, more than a hundred performances and two national tours. This also implies that I was in a privileged position to gather some of the material that informs this case study, including audiences’ responses to the work. It is customary for the company to invite audience members to informally discuss the show with us after each performance. If such practice inevitably means that much of the feedback is by default positive – more often than not, disgruntled audience members tend to avoid exchanging with us – it does however provides a wealth of commentaries on the work, borrowing a technique characteristic of ethnographical endeavours.

To reflect these dimensions, I have located my voice in the fabric of the text, even more so perhaps than in the other three case studies. Rachel Fensham’s

approach to writing about one's experience of watching theatre has provided a useful frame of reference for this thesis, but I now shift her argument from an audience member's perspective to the one of a performer. Fensham writes:

I have often chosen to use the "I" voice and to write in the present tense, as if I am watching here now. I have done this to activate for the reader a sense of the impressionistic quality of interpretation in the theatre, but also to hopefully keep alive the vividness of the event in the written analysis. (21)

The "impressionistic quality of interpretation" Fensham refers to is an essential dimension of this study: the "I" that appears in this thesis and especially in this chapter is infused with the presence of my perceiving physicality. However, unlike Fensham, I have also used the past tense to reflect the devising process that generated *Operation Greenfield*. Fensham goes further stating that "[s]ince so much of theatre's intercorporeality is more invisible than visible, we watch for this slow turning of a body in representation from one subtle form to another to become present" (19). Writing from a practitioner's perspective, my purpose is the same: to acknowledge the "subtle", "invisible" corporeal and intimate shifts that happen in performance, for performers and audience members, and to take into account the effects and repercussions of such invisible yet experienced changes.

I also use a collective "we" that encompasses myself as part of the company. This way, I reflect the inherently collective and collaborative nature of the work, so precious to Little Bulb Theatre, and I occasionally speak in five

voices. However, because my position as associate artist means I do not carry administrative duties, my role in the company's artistic direction is subsidiary more than decisive. In order to write about *Operation Greenfield*, I have found necessary to constantly navigate between speaking from a place of experience and analysing the company's work independently of my participation. Therefore, instances where I speak about "them" suggest that I reflect on a company I am a part of but also, occasionally, not completely a part of. I should also at this stage reiterate that *Operation Greenfield* is not an example of practice-as-research: it was not devised as an exploration of a specific theoretical framework. Rather, it is used as a case study to explore research questions I have developed independently of my involvement in *Operation Greenfield*. Therefore, the following analysis is not Little Bulb Theatre's account but my researcher's point of view on some specific aspects of the piece, examined through a personal theoretical prism.

"Making" intimate spaces

Operation Greenfield was co-devised and performed by Clare Beresford as Molly, Dominic Conway as Daniel, Shamira Turner as Alice and myself as Violet. Molly, Daniel and Alice are practising Anglicans, and have been lifelong residents of Stokely, the fictional village where the show is set; Violet is a Catholic newly arrived from France. The narrative spans a school year and several fictional locations; yet, the set of *Operation Greenfield* remains mostly the same throughout the show and fictional places are created on stage by the performers' movement and their use of props. I explore in the following section how movement is used in *Operation Greenfield* to "make" the spaces of the

fiction on stage, in a way that actually blurs the distinctions between the different theatrical spaces. This embodied knowledge of the way these spaces are created, from our perspective as practitioners, suggests that repeated movement enabled a felt alternative experience of theatre-making, and grounded a political, economic and emotional cost in our very physicalities.

Overlapping spaces

The fictional places of *Operation Greenfield* are activated by the performers through a very specific choreography. However, the way they are represented blurs boundaries between what McAuley has defined the “stage space”, the “presentational space” and “onstage fictional spaces” (25). Such an overlapping blurs the distinction between what is factual and what is fictional, between performers and characters. McAuley suggests that “the space the spectator is watching during the performance ... is always both stage and somewhere else” (27). McAuley’s definition of the “stage space” is rather straightforward: it is the “physical space of the stage” (29). What McAuley terms “presentational space” is “the physical use made of this stage space”, while the “fictional space” consists of “the place or places presented, represented or evoked onstage and off” (29). McAuley understands the “fictional space” as “already and necessarily incorporating a commentary on itself and on the means that produce it” (30).

In *Operation Greenfield*, this dimension is complicated by the fact that “onstage fictional” and “presentational” spaces collide. This characteristic is certainly not specific to *Operation Greenfield*: Camille Boitel’s *L’Immédiat* (2012) for example, with the presence of the show’s technicians on the side of

the stage, in a gigantic metallic structure; or the musicians who, sat in the periphery of the stage space in Kneehigh's *The Red Shoes* (2011), compose a live score for the action, are two of many examples. But if the stage in performance is always "both stage and somewhere else", in *Operation Greenfield* this ambiguous overlapping is complicated by the syncretism between the two environments. Most of the show's fictional places, such as the school canteen or the characters' rooms, are in McAuley's terminology "presented, represented and evoked" (29) by token objects that the performers manipulate. However, a few of these "onstage fictional" places also operate as "presentational" spaces. This is the case, for instance, of what we call, among ourselves, the "Christian Club corner", located stage right, and the "sound desk", placed stage left. These places primarily serve a practical function: the "Christian Club corner" is the place to and from where performers travel so as to store or collect props; in turn, the performers relocate in the vicinity of the "sound desk" (a red foldable table with a small PA system and a double CD-player on top) when the musical score needs changing.

The way these spaces, whose function is so well delimited within the "presentational space", fade into "onstage fictional" places is more problematic. The show opens with the four performers already on stage, sat on chairs, acknowledging audience members without interacting with them. When the house lights go down, the four performers stand as if propelled by a spring mechanism, and deliver a heavily stylised rendition of the biblical story of the Annunciation. We are at this instant dressed in plain white T-shirts and blue jeans. The scene ends abruptly, and each performer relocates to the delimited

space, between erected ladders, that constitutes her/his “backstage room”.²²⁷ There, each one of us covers her/his white T-shirt with the block coloured garment that epitomises her/his character. Wearing the blue dress that represents Violet, I move from my character’s backstage room to the “sound desk”, and abruptly turn off the track that is playing. This example illustrates the simultaneous slippage and overlapping from “presentational” to “fictional” spaces: while the characters’ rooms, physically represented on stage by gaps between the ladders at the back of the stage, are not read as actual rooms but as fictional places inscribed on the stage space, the “music desk” does not refer to any “music desk” in the fiction. Instead, it refers to its own presence in the presentational space at the very moment of the performance. This “place” is ambiguous because it is on stage yet thematically belongs to the “off stage”.



Figure 16 - Photo by India Roper-Evans

²²⁷ I use the expression “backstage room” here so as to distinguish between the two ways the characters’ bedrooms are represented on stage: between the ladders at the back, or through specific arrangements of chairs at the front. This terminology is mine and was never used by the company.

The “Christian Club corner” occupies a slightly different position since it exists in the fiction, thus appearing as an “onstage fictional place”. However, it also morphs. The props stored on that side of the stage epitomise the “Christian Club”; they are also referred to, in the piece, as objects filling a cabinet in the fictional “Christian Club”. When these props are taken out of the “cupboard”, they are used to create, centre stage, Stokely Christian Club in its “onstage fictional place” form. The onstage Christian Club “cupboard” functions as a space meant to be kept offstage but that has been placed on the stage and is acknowledged in the fiction. This space is thus an “onstage fictional” place: it is a localisable cupboard in a specific venue, but it is also “presentational space”, and to an extent, “off stage space” that has been placed on stage. What is key here is not so much that, by overlapping, the different theatrical spaces highlight the artifice of theatre; it is instead that the concertinaing of “fictional” and “presentational” spaces blurs the line between fact and fiction. It is uncertain whether the personae that face the audience at the start of the show are the performers or the characters. Similarly, the fact that the technical score is operated from the stage by the performers-as-characters makes technical cues as much a part of the fictional as the presentational worlds of the piece. In this way, Little Bulb Theatre blur the boundary between performer and character, a dimension which has consequences on a thematic level – it is unsure whether the story is autobiographical or not. This in turn problematises the questions with regard to faith, religion and homosexuality that the piece deals with, potentially enabling a sense of identification with audience members who might relate to similar events through kinaesthetic empathy.

“Making” spaces

Throughout the performance, the chairs and the multitude of props scattered around the stage are used to physically represent specific fictional places. The idea that we “make” these places through our physical score echoes Michel de Certeau’s maxim that “*space is a practiced place*” (117). Through the use of a physicality that composes vignette-like scenes, Little Bulb Theatre convey a sense of the intimate dimension of some of these fictional places.

To depict one’s aloneness in one’s room, for example, the performers execute stereotypical adolescent activities: Conway as Daniel silently plays guitar, Beresford as Molly listens to music through headphones. The show’s interest in representing religion as a practice supposes that religious places are depicted on stage: the Catholic church is represented by stereotypical signifiers - a garish golden and LED-incrusted cross, introduced earlier as Violet’s own and thus linked to the Catholic faith - the host and wine taken as part of the Eucharist, here replaced by fruit squash and a crisp, and a kneeling and rapturous Violet. The church sits at the intersection between private and public realms. Subtle changes happen in shifting from the public to the private dimension of these fictional places. When Violet and Alice are seen praying, each one in front of the cross that epitomises her trend of the religion, they are both represented kneeling down, hands joined, eyes tightly closed, in a very predictable, caricatured representation of praying.



Figure 17 - The Catholic Church.
Photos by India Roper-Evans

Later in the same scene, my character moves from praying alone in her room to being at church. This shift from private praying to rapturous communion is depicted in bold, caricatured gestures: Violet, still on her knees and her back to the audience, raises both arms in a semi-circle and receives the host, before turning round to face the audience, open-mouthed and eyes semi-closed in an expression of ecstasy. When solitary praying was depicted in a stereotypical way, the Catholic Church service is represented in even bolder a way, in a caricature of the way the Catholic Church might appear to Anglican eyes. The shift between the privacy of one's room and the collective intimate space of the church is illustrated by an expanded physicality and gestures that have become bigger and bolder. The company describes these heavily caricatured gestures as “bad” and as “theatre no-nos”: they are clichés. In an interview I conducted with him, Scott mentions that clichés were a texture he, as a director, was interested in for the “sort of ... embodied truth” they possess. Scott also sees clichés as a way of circumventing a serious and dogmatic take on the piece's subject matter.

These clichés operate on a synecdochal level, what Susan Leigh Foster’s analyses in *Reading Dancing* as when “the dance becomes a special voice, speaking to the world about essential things”. When playing with synecdoche, the choreography “transform[s] personal experience into universal condition” (2). The interest of using movement with such a quality is manifold. First, it provides a humorous take on the religious aspects of the show and the way they are evoked in the piece. Representing religion in this way meant the company tackled issues we felt were significant, without however providing any ready-made answer. Caricature signifies to the audience that the performers, and the piece, do not take themselves too seriously. They also allowed us to expand the physical vocabularies we were using, regardless of what we perceived was “good” or “bad” taste. Our apparent eagerness to commit to such gestures we knew were not necessarily “good” further casted a doubt on the identity of those on stage. It fuelled an impression of earnestness that complemented the characters’ age and general understated passionate behaviour, thus contributing to the idea that the piece was autobiographical. This assumption provoked a sense of identification between ourselves and our characters, in a way that connected the audience with our physicality on an intimate level, provoking embodied reactions to the display of adolescent turmoil. In this respect, the “physical theatres” we created in *Operation Greenfield* enabled a renewed experience of performance, with the apparent confluence of our performers’ and our own intimacies.

Spatial capital

As suggested in the examples mentioned above, the places represented on stage are “made” by the performers’ physicality and our use of props. The objects used as props have been an integral part of the devising process: they bear for us a history of the genesis of the show. Since Scott found a large amount of them in second-hand shops, they also came into the world of the play with a previous history of their own. McAuley’s decision to include a section on objects in her study of space in performance highlights the function of props as constituents of theatrical space (173). This and the idea that, following de Certeau, places are “made” through the performers’ practice of the “presentational” space, suggest that the performers activate these spaces thanks to their intrinsic knowledge of them. When touring the work, the cast has of course to adapt to novel and occasionally challenging spatial configurations. However, the specific arrangement of the props on stage supposes that the cast experience the “presentational” space each night as altogether different yet absolutely similar.

Talking about his own practice in *Feeling Theatre*, Martin Welton suggests that the practice of “walk-throughs” prior to public performance allows not only the “mapping [of] one space onto another”, but also what Welton calls “the re-feeling [of] one’s way through previously embodied material under new or altered constraints” (119). This suggests that we have acquired a unique in-depth knowledge of the “presentational” space as it is re-created nightly by the arrangements of props. In Welton’s words, the practice of space that we carried on in rehearsal “lends a structure to the feeling of place which is quotidian even in the relative novelty of a new venue” (120). This feeling of quotidian-ness

arises because the “presentational space” is, indeed, meticulously structured. Importantly, this also suggests that we, as performers and as makers of the piece, carry with ourselves an embodied, intimate knowledge of the spaces of the piece. “Re-feeling” our way through these spaces, even under altered conditions, highlights how these spaces were *felt* and embodied to be remembered in the first place. Indeed, because the choreography and scenography were collectively devised in the rehearsal room, acquiring an embodied knowledge of it was a prerequisite to the existence of the piece.

This knowledge constitutes a “spatial capital”, a term I borrow to social geography, that is specifically acquired as it is experienced. Drawing on de Certeau, geographers Michel Lussault and Mathis Stock analyse that while place can be seen as “a geometrical arrangement of things”, space has to be considered as “an emergent dimension realised by the actions of individuals” (14), adding that “space is constructed during the action, not before or after” (17). The presentational space of *Operation Greenfield* is similarly constructed by our practice of it, which presupposes it has been carefully and painstakingly arranged, built, and rehearsed. It is in this way that the presentational space and within it, the “onstage fictional” spaces represented through *practice*, constitute a form of “spatial capital”. Lussault and Stock identify “spatial capital” as a concept that “explicitly stems from and aims at developing Bourdieu’s theory of capital” (16). It is defined elsewhere by Lussault and Jacques Lévy, in *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l’espace des sociétés* (2003), as “l’ensemble des ressources accumulées par un acteur lui permettant de tirer avantage, en

fonction de sa stratégie, de l'usage de la dimension spatiale de la société".²²⁸ In an article where he applies the concept of "spatial capital" to the study of the population of the French city of Tours, geographer Laurent Cailly specifies that "spatial capital" "constitue précisément *un ensemble de valeurs (spatiales) accumulées et mobilisées en vue de produire d'autres valeurs*" (170, emphasis in the original).²²⁹

Using this approach is not without problems. When the definition of "spatial capital" takes into account the agency of an actor in space within a wider social context, I focus here on a very specific and restricted area of the social realm: performance and theatre-making. The spaces at work in a performance are by essence distinct from the ones Lussault, Stock or Cailly examine. I do not suppose a relation of analogy between the way spaces are "practiced" by the inhabitants of a city, and the way they are "practiced" by performers on a stage. However, I argue it is apt to apply the concept of "spatial capital" to a theatre context for it simultaneously highlights a dynamic perception of space as *lived* and *made*, and the role of the actors who practice such a space. More importantly, this framework highlights the conditions that subtended its acquisition by the company. It is indeed through repeated practice, in rehearsal and performance, that this "spatial capital" was acquired. This presupposes that a significant amount of time was dedicated to this practice, which suggests that this "spatial capital" is entirely dependent on the performers' occupation. The acquisition of "spatial capital" through repeated practice is in rupture with the economic and social context in which it was produced. In the current economic

²²⁸ "the whole of an actor's accumulated resources, that allow her/him to profit from a use of the spatial dimension of society, depending on her/his strategy."

²²⁹ "consists of a set of (spatial) values accumulated and summoned so as to produce other values."

climate, taking time to devise and rehearse a show certainly allows one to acquire a greater knowledge of its technicalities. It also however supposes occasionally working for free. In many ways, the long gestation process of *Operation Greenfield* is an aberration in an industry where most shows need to be devised over a short amount of time, as exemplified by the restrictions put upon Told by an Idiot's rehearsals of *You Can't Take It With You*. Working in a more experimental environment may suppose less financial profit but a greater independence in the creative process.

Whilst the amount of time spent acquiring such "spatial capital" goes against what the industry presupposes, it can be summoned so as to produce other values, to paraphrase Cailly. In the case of *Operation Greenfield*, the "spatial capital" of the performers is visible in the ease and precision with which we perform the physical score of the piece— a quality often noted by audience members. Our "spatial capital" allows us to produce a non/virtuosic physicality that makes the show marketable and compensates for our lack of formal training. To account for its emotional, temporal and financial cost, it has been preferable for this show to be performed as many times as possible. The way this "spatial capital" is at counter-current with economic requirements of the industry suggests an alternative to a system that promotes the fast production of art for money. That such a capital was acquired through a collectively designed and performed practice also provides an alternative to an industry that favours individual performers over a company-based system for economic reasons (Govan et al. 4). In this respect, the "physical theatres" devised by Little Bulb Theatre propose a collective experience of performance-making that is grounded in a collective intimacy and that in itself constitutes an alternative.

Choreographing intimacy

I have examined how the spaces of *Operation Greenfield* are in turn, in McAuley's terminology, "presentational", "onstage fictional" spaces, and what I have called thematically off-stage spaces. Distinctions between these three categories are blurred, which contributes to casting a doubt on the identity of the performers. I have also analysed how our embodied knowledge of these spaces, especially when thought of as "spatial capital", suggests an alternative to dominant ways of making theatre. In the following section, I focus on the way music, both live and recorded, is used in conjunction with physicality to create intimate choreographies that enable an alternative and embodied experience of performance, from both a performer's point of view and for the audience.

Soundtracks: the dramatic function of recorded music in *Operation Greenfield*

Apart from instances where music is played live, recorded music constitutes a permanent underlying texture of the show. The different tracks used throughout mirror its narrative development: each sequence is set to a specific song. Changing the track means stepping into another sequence, temporally as in the narrative. The constant presence of music in *Operation Greenfield* resembles the way a soundtrack operates in film, a dimension Scott acknowledges as consciously constructed. Scott argues that using full-length tracks bestows honesty to the work: if the songs are not cut down to accommodate the narrative, then the action needs to be devised with and around these constraints ("Interview"), which supposes the narrative parallels the emotions mapped out by the music. Scott also mentions that it confers to the piece a "musical memory"

quality (“Interview”). This expression tellingly connects the use of a soundtrack to the evocation of emotions.

That recorded music should be used to map out the emotional texture of each scene means it operates like what Kathryn Kalinak calls a “classical Hollywood film score”. In *Settling the Score*, Kalinak explains that the “classical Hollywood film score” is used to “prioritize narrative exposition”, “sustain structural unity”, “illustrate narrative content, both implicit and explicit, including a high degree of direct synchronization between music and narrative action” (78). When myself as Violet and Conway as Daniel, alone in Daniel’s “backstage room”, find ourselves sat next to each other and eventually kissing, the track that plays in the background, Angelo Badalamenti’s *Country Waltz*, “illustrate[s] the narrative content” (78) of the scene.²³⁰ The track’s final section consists of three phrases played by strings. Coyly looking at each other, the two protagonists lean toward one another and as the first phrase starts, kiss for its whole duration. At this moment, the track operates as what Kalinak calls a “romantic leitmotif”: “dramatic upward leaps in the melodic line; sustained melodic expression in the form of long phrases; lush harmonies; and reliance upon the expressivity of the strings to carry the melody” (88). The soundtrack maps out the emotional undertones of the scene: the romantic character of the encounter is acknowledged and played with in a tongue-in-cheek manner. In this case, music is nondiegetic: what Pauline Reay defines in her study *Music in Film* as “music that appears to come from outside the story world ... often heard as background music” (127). As such, it gives a physical presence to emotions that

²³⁰ The track originally belonged to the soundtrack of David Lynch’s *The Straight Story*. Many of the compositions chosen for the devising of *Operation Greenfield* were taken from film soundtracks.

are supposedly unknown to the characters but acknowledged by the audience. As in a Hollywood film score, the track

not only respond[s] to explicit content, but fleshe[s] out what [is] not visually discernible in the image... In this capacity, music [is] expected to perform a variety of functions: provide characterization, embody abstract ideas, externalize thought, and create mood and emotion. (Kalinak 86)

The use of music in these scenes provides an entry point for the audience into the characters' psyche. Music maps out "what [is] not visually discernible" and lays out an aural space for the characters' intimate realms to be experienced.

Recorded music in *Operation Greenfield* opens a window into a character's intimacy, making the spectator omniscient. However, the fact that *Operation Greenfield* is a live performance means that the soundtrack is played as the action is seen. Furthermore, the performers are the ones who operate the soundtrack from the stage. This conscious, ironic play with conventions is best illustrated in instances where recorded music is used diegetically. Diegetic music in film supposes, in Reay's words, that "the "source" of music can be observed on screen" (127): the music is an element of the fiction and is heard by the characters. This is illustrated for instance in the scene we refer to as the "montage", a quick-paced sequence that shows the passing of time and the evolving relationships between all four characters, shortly before the middle of the performance. Turner as Alice starts the track that accompanies this montage: James Horner's *The Library*. Alice operating the track suggests the character

hears the music. However, as soon as the first notes begin, Turner moves away from the “sound desk” and does not acknowledge the track as a part of the fiction. The way Turner shifts from operating the soundtrack to ignoring it underlines how, in *Operation Greenfield*, diegetic and nondiegetic music are in a relation of tension.

Arguably, they would be in any theatrical performance: nondiegetic music cannot ever be actually nondiegetic in live performance since it has not been added in post-production and is contemporary to the events happening on stage. In *Operation Greenfield* however, this is complicated as music is always operated from the stage, by the performers who are acting as the characters. As such, recorded music is here always also diegetic, even when the source of the music is not acknowledged in the fiction. Thus, when one of us changes a track during the show, s/he does so being simultaneously character and persona. This transforms the fictional space into an intermediary between fictional and technical spaces. In this regard, music mirrors the way boundaries between “presentational” and “onstage fictional” spaces are uncertain. Music challenges spatial distinctions by opening up imaginary and emotional spaces through the use of a “soundtrack”. More importantly, it is used in conjunction with physicality, to operate on an intimate level and emotionally connect the audience with the action. The effect produced here echoes the way the overlapping of spatial delineations enabled a “closer” relationship between the audience and the action, by blurring lines between performers and characters.

Intimate choreographies

The concertinaing of diegetic and nondiegetic qualities of the soundtrack highlights a point of friction between the recorded musical “score” and the physical choreography: when diegetic music slips and becomes nondiegetic, it is because the performers-as-characters operate the “sound desk” as part of our physical score. I now explore how the musical score *felt* in the devising of a physical choreography. In the following section, I examine how movement was devised alongside the musical score. Using dance scholar Stephanie Jordan’s concept of “parallelism”, I analyse how the soundtrack shaped the narrative. Secondly, I examine how the performers use music to remember the choreography, in a way that makes both music and movement remembered through the way they *feel*, on an intimate and somatic level.

The process of devising with music was twofold: either the music influenced the choreography, or it was found afterwards to match the scene. In *Moving Music*, Jordan examines the relationships between music and ballet, and develops the concept of “parallelism” that she defines as “interdependence and interaction between music and dance” (63). “Parallelism”, in Jordan’s definition, supposes that music and movement can be examined as interrelated rather than focusing on one as being an accompaniment to the other. This does not mean, however, that they cannot be subordinated to one another in the devising of a movement sequence.

The “montage” I mentioned earlier, performed to deafeningly loud music (Arcade Fire’s *Antichrist Television Blues*), is one example of a scene where music was the initial impetus. When we first performed it in front of an audience, during a work-in-progress sharing at the Battersea Arts Centre in May 2010, the

sequence was criticised by several audience members as lacking material. Indeed, at this stage, the five-minute sequence only depicted each character's morning routine. Following this feedback, we integrated additional narrative elements to the scene, inserting as many physical actions as possible within the length of the track, an exercise that presupposed speeding up the pace of every individual action. The choreography we eventually performed in the show seems to literally be "running after" the musical cues, playfully subverting the ascendance of a visual over an aural dimension of choreographed movement, in an example of "parallelism". Jordan mentions for example the "power relationships" at work between the way "visual and aural perceptions have been viewed" (63), arguing that "until recently, Western culture has tended to consider the eye superior to the ear" (64). Schneider similarly argues that an "oculo-centric" (103) approach to performance is what categorises the remains that do not fit into the *archive* as being ephemeral and thus bound to disappear. She suggests adopting instead a perspective that encompasses other means of remembering, a concern that has influenced the methodology used in this thesis.

This example illustrates how several sections of the show were devised. I have already mentioned Scott's interest in using full-length tracks, arguing that this process did not allow any "cheating". The "montage" music is both diegetic (it reflects what is taking place in the fiction) and nondiegetic (it propels the characters to embark on a sped-up version of their day). In this respect, music is used to map out the emotions of the fiction, whilst the physical score playfully acknowledges its pace. By inviting the performers to devise a physical score that complemented the track, Scott, in his own words, "tightly choreographed what was happening, emotionally and dramatically, to coincide with what the music

was doing” (“Interview”). This process, that Scott calls a “mathematical exercise”, partially shaped the way the whole piece was structured, especially in the later stages of the process. Choosing which tracks he wanted to work with, Scott mapped out the show’s dramaturgical arc. When the time came to edit a final version of the show, in July 2010, Scott fashioned the structure of the piece in temporal terms. Having set for it a total duration of 90 minutes,²³¹ he calculated how many of the scenes that had been devised could fit within this time frame, counting for this the total duration of all the tracks used for each scenes. This mathematical dimension infused the whole piece, on both a thematic and an aesthetic level. The example of “parallelism” that this scene provides highlights how the “physical theatres” at work here contribute to destabilising an ocular-centric perspective on movement, providing in this respect an alternative and somatic strategy for performance-making.

Remembering choreographies

Devising physical sequences to whole tracks supposed that we had to appropriate the musical score, to become intimate with its pace and specificities, and to acquire a somatic understanding of it, something that my position as an “insider” with a first-hand experience of the choreography allows me to reflect on. However, because I sum up over a hundred public performances and many more hours spent rehearsing, the question, acknowledged by Jordan, of the accuracy of movement remembering and movement notation arises here. Jordan wonders whether the notator should “record the choreographer’s intentions and demonstrations, “nuances through the body”, or the dancers’ approximation”?

²³¹ The piece has since been reduced to 80 minutes.

She adds: “[i]f there is slippage during the creative process, which “version” should be recorded” (90)? The problem is made more complex here since “notator” and performer are the same, and the “record” is tightly intertwined with somatic and emotional memories: mine, and those of four other people.



Figure 18 – *Operation Greenfield*: the “montage”. Photo by India Roper-Evans

Jordan mentions the different “techniques” dancers use to synchronise choreography to music, asking: “(d)o they listen, or do they count?” (93). Jordan points out that “the counting technique has become increasingly widely used” (93). It unquestionably provides a common vocabulary for choreographer and performers. Jordan adds that “the manner in which dancers are taught phrasing is also important to interpretation, to their musical response”, thus highlighting the inherently subjective quality of a dancer’s interpretation of movement, and the impact of the musical score on one’s physical and emotional response to movement.

Many of the sequences in *Operation Greenfield* were devised using a terminology that includes terms such as “beats” and “counts”. Ironically, these were on occasion already present in the musical track, as when Turner as Alice and myself as Violet meet for the first time to Philip Glass’ *Knee Play 1*.²³² The

²³² The piece is taken from Glass’ *Einstein on the Beach* (1976).

track is characterised by a serie of numbers, from one to eight, enumerated by a female voice and subsequently sung by a choir. At the end of this first encounter, Turner and I move from Alice's room to Violet's room, a change represented by the fact that the two characters sit on the same chairs, but in a different order. This change takes place during a brief physical sequence where Turner and myself move one step at a time, on a grid. The robotic dimension of the movement is matched by the minimalism of the track, which in turn gently mocks choreographic rules as it makes the counting apparent.

Paradoxically, the performers do not move alongside the counts sung in the track, but alongside *internal* ones. I personally struggle with this technique: I quickly lose track of the counts and often revert to listening to and feeling the musical markers. When this scene change was re-devised, in October 2011, and a jump I would do for the duration of a "beat" was replaced by stillness for the same amount of time, I found myself doing the same mistake over and over again, as if my internal *listening* to the beats had been upset. Turner on the other hand kept a record of these changes in the form of precise counts she mentally enumerated alongside those already present in the track. This example illustrates Jordan's point that "the counts may not necessarily be those that the choreographer used... But counts do indicate phrasing, even if a dancer stops using them after a while" (95). Turner integrated the "counts" and "beats" as a way of monitoring how musical phrasing felt in relation to movement. They provided at the same time a useful vocabulary to communicate this internally *felt* score with me and with Scott, and a standard for choreographic accuracy.

Choreographer Jonathan Burrows explores his own approach to devising movement in *A Choreographer's Handbook* (2010). If Burrows' work is

inherently different from Little Bulb Theatre's, his collaborations with composer Matteo Fargion are similarly characterised by a tongue-in-cheek quality and the use of minute movement to generate mesmerising and touching performances.²³³ In Burrows' words, when the counts are no longer needed by the performers, "the relative weight of ... movement" can be "buil(t) ... exactly to the strength of the sound we ... hear" (181). This suggests a "balance" between "the force of the music and the force of the movement" (181). In the last third of the "montage" I described previously, a significant shift in the music, characterised by a high-pitched onomatopoeic singing, propels Turner, Beresford and myself to hastily run towards the row of boxes located at the front of the stage. We each pick up a Barbie doll that we raise slowly while tiptoeing backwards energetically. On a second shift in the music – the beginning of another section by the same singer – all three throw our dolls in the air, leaping in a circular motion.



Figure 19 - *Operation Greenfield*. The "montage". Photo by India Roper-Evans

Once I felt familiar with the technical aspects of the "montage", I found performing this scene exhilarating. I attribute this feeling to several factors: a release from an otherwise tense and focused choreography; the way this scene

²³³ See *Cheap Lecture* (2009) for instance.

feels for my character; the feeling of togetherness arising from executing the same movement with my two partners; a very physical response to adrenaline, and finally, the deafening loudness of the track. What Burrows identifies as the “force of music” is at this instant balanced by “the force of the movement”. The performers have often felt that the pace and energy of the “montage” were determined by the loudness of the track. Beresford for instance reported that “low-energy” montages had had the music set at a low volume. This relationship between the loudness of the track, physically felt on stage because of the way it is amplified, and this felt quality of the movement, highlight the way we somatically integrated the musical score. The choreography becomes remembered through an emotional layering of past and present performances. The physical and the technical scores are remembered not simply as “counts”, but as a complex intertwining of memories, sensations, and feelings of the “phrasing”.

The subtle interaction of conscious, unconscious, and not-solely-conscious remembering processes at work in the recollection and re-performing of a choreographic score is on the verge of what can be articulated: somewhere between conscious endeavour and accidental sleepwalking. Choreographer Rosemary Butcher articulates this in a particularly potent way when she acknowledges that what “might be the most striking ... is the fact that “the work” surprises its maker, once “it” emerges, and begins to stabilise itself” (67). My experience of the work, in a relationship of close knowledge and yet as always a sort of minuscule miracle (that we have taken the show to the end, that we have been able to release enough energy) questions what Butcher calls my ““knowledge-status” as performance-maker, with regard to “the work””, making

such status “tentative, hesitant, questioning, bemused” (67). It is in this constant movement between the two polarisations of a same spectrum, between holding the piece up close yet never feeling I *know* the show, and in the embodied knowledge I have of the choreography and its relationship to the soundtrack, that the performance(s) of *Operation Greenfield* “remains”, to echo Schneider’s perspective. In this respect, I do not account for the “bones” of the performance and write instead its embodied memory.

The physical dimension of music and sound

Having explored the influence of recorded music on the devising process and on the performers “intimate” choreographies, I analyse now the way music is performed live in the show. I first examine the playing of music as a choreographed practice and how this challenges an idea of the performers’ intimacy. I also see how live music complicates the distinction between performance genres. In this respect, live music involves audiences in a way that I argue is “gently subversive”, particularly with regard to the transformation of the theatre space into a “gig” space and the consequent somatic participation of the audience. Finally, I look at acting, focusing primarily on voice, to highlight how the fact that we speak in a character’s voice problematises notions of physicality and of intimacy.

Music playing as choreographed practice

Making music, whether playing an instrument or singing, is a physical activity that I propose to see as a choreographed practice. In *Operation*

Greenfield, this choreographed dimension is especially marked since we play music as characters. The score is thus as musical as it is theatrical. Such a perspective problematises the relationship for the performers, but also for the audience, between characters and personae: because the physicality of live music is intrinsic to our physicality, it is intimately connected to us on an emotional and a somatic level. This is illustrated by the way one's body is trained and adapted, through repetitive practice, to "fit" the instrument. As much as dance practice shapes a dancer's physicality, a fact that has been extensively addressed in dance scholarship (Novack *Sharing the Dance*; Foster *Dances That Describe Themselves*; Thomas *The Body*; Ness "Being a Body"; D'Amelio "On the Premises" 94), so does the practice of music. In Susan Leigh Foster's words, in both cases, "not only the training programme but also the rehearsal process contribute[s] to the formation of a specific corporeality" (*Dances That Describe Themselves* 148).

That most training methods include a section on the "right" physicality to adopt when playing an instrument, the numerous websites and forums dedicated to the risks of Repetitive Strain Injury for musicians and especially guitarists, the presence at London's Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital of a Musicians and Performing Arts Clinic, or the acknowledgement of health problems related to the practice of an instrument in publications about Rheumatology, all illustrate the impact of practice on the musician's body.²³⁴ If this can be said of the practice of any instrument, the fact that playing an instrument affects the musician's physicality is pushed further in *Operation Greenfield*, for the training and rehearsal process have shaped both the

²³⁴ See for example C. Michael Lambert, "Hand and Upper Limb Problems of Instrumental Musicians", 1992.

performers' corporeality and the characters' physicality. I do not play the bass guitar as Violet as I play the bass guitar when I am not in character: my physicality is more restrained when I play as Violet, it *feels* like my character's more than my own.

These considerations on the physical and somatic implications of instrument practice echo Sally Ann Ness' perspectives on the repeated practice of dance. Ness argues that an inscription of dance is to be looked for in the very flesh of those who execute the dance: in their muscles, their ligaments, their bones ("Inward Migrations"). The calluses that have appeared at the tip of my fingers, the subtle muscular swell at the base of my thumb in the palm of my left hand, are inscriptions of the practicing and performing of the songs that involve Violet playing bass guitar.²³⁵ The choreography has become embodied and entangled in an intimate relationship with other somatic and emotional functions. Both my practice of the bass, and Violet's practice of the bass, are *inscribed* in my flesh. In the way practice leaves marks on one's corporeality, "remains" of the performance are produced, echoing Schneider's critique of the idea of performance as an ephemeral endeavour. Pains, thrills, fears, processes, experienced by the performers, lived in our flesh, in rehearsals, in the series of repeated yet always different performances, along with the necessary work of time, all inscribe a history, a memory of the work into our flesh, our muscles and our emotional memory.

In *Agency and Embodiment*, Noland explores Ness' aforementioned statement and suggests that "moving bodies, from the moment they enter

²³⁵ While other musical performances with Little Bulb Theatre involved me playing bass guitar, the devising of *Operation Greenfield* constituted my first reunion with the instrument, which practice I had abandoned as a teenager. Therefore, these physical marks on my hands were to a great extent formed by my performance as Violet.

culture”, become a “substance on which, and into which, the gestural routines of a specific group ... are constantly reinscribed” (213). This is an interesting claim when applied to performance-making in general, and to collectively devised work in particular. The “gestural routines of a specific group” are here the collectively choreographed music playing of a group of theatre-makers creating a group of characters, whose gestural habits they both devise and embody when playing instruments. However, as Noland highlights, Ness very much emphasises the “enduring character” of the “host material” (Ness, “Inscriptions” 4), suggesting that “we receive the anonymous imprint of conditioning but are simulatenously enabled to feel ourselves moving in new ways” (Noland 214). This is a particularly interesting claim when applied to this specific context, as the cultural patternings that Noland identifies in gestures are here supplemented by additional cultural signifiers that the company consciously uses in the devising of the characters’ “gestures”. Indeed, in order to play the bass guitar as Violet, I first had to learn how to play the bass guitar as myself. In this respect, music playing bears the potential of being doubly subversive, in the way it depicts an embodied cultural conditioning that it then disrupts, on a felt and intimate dimension, for the performer who becomes hyper-aware of the discrepancy between such learned physical behaviour and the kinetic sensation of “gesture”.

Live music and materiality

Live music in the show supposes that its practice is inscribed in the performers’ physicality, constituting one of the “remains” of performances of *Operation Greenfield*. Because we play music as characters, the practice of

instruments in the show is intertwined with the narrative and is integrated to the physical score. I argue now that the playing of live music in *Operation Greenfield* blurs generic distinctions between a “play” and a “gig” aesthetic, especially at the end of the piece. This shift includes audience members in a sonic experience of the piece that differs from a theatrical experience. In this respect, using live music as a way of making “physical theatres” suggests an alternative experience for the audience and creates alternative possibilities for the story to be told. The inclusion of songs in the fabric of the play is not an exceptional feature per se. Kneehigh’s *Don John* (2009) for instance, or more recent productions from the current American avant-garde such as the T.E.A.M.’s *Mission Drift* (2011) or the postmodern musical-cum-cabaret of Banana Bag and Bodice’s *Beowulf* (2011) illustrate this tendency.²³⁶ In all these examples as for *Operation Greenfield*, the pieces do not consist of musical theatre,²³⁷ and experiment instead with including music and songs as part of the narrative.

The several instances where music is played live in *Operation Greenfield* are framed as band rehearsals or fantasies. They culminate at the end of the show, when the band “Operation Greenfield”, composed of all four characters, perform their entry to the talent competition. The intention behind this scene was to shift from a theatre aesthetics to a “gig” aesthetics, something that was clearly felt and acknowledged by audience members. At the end of the band’s entry, titled *Zachariah in the Temple*, the company embark on a seven-minute long adaptation of the second movement of Henryk Górecki’s *Symphony of Sorrowful*

²³⁶ In another genre, yet illustrative of this current trend, is Greg McLaren’s *Doris Day Can Fuck Off* (2011). McLaren’s premise is to sing the whole show, in an echo of and a reflection on the research he lead in the devising of the show, when he spent three months – it is not specified whether they were consecutive or not – singing in all situations of his private and public life.

²³⁷ I understand “musical theatre” as pieces where songs are used to illustrate and comment on the narration. For a more detailed definition, see John Henrick, *Musical Theatre: A History* (2008).

Songs. The end of *Zachariah*... is signified by a black out, during which we re-arrange and are revealed, when the light comes up again, as if ready to bow. Still in character despite the fact that the piece seems to have ended, Conway addresses the audience as Daniel and introduces the scene referred to as “Revelation”.²³⁸ The lights dim for the first time since the start of the performance, and a subtle change operates as we start playing. During this last scene, our personae *feel* closer to our white T-shirt personae than to our characters. This subtle yet visible change from characters to personae concurs with shifting from the play, with clearly defined characters, to a “gig”, where the performers are musicians.

Shifting toward a music “gig” aesthetics, first as characters and then as personae, creates a pressurised environment where sound surrounds audience members and performers alike.²³⁹ Because the music is then played very loudly, the amplification grants a physical dimension to sound, and as was the case in Lambert-wild et al.’s *La Mort d’Adam*, literally *touches* the audience. The fact that the amplification devices we use are not resistant enough to support such a loud level means this material dimension is given very tangible evidence. The guitar and bass amplifiers crackle, the microphone that Turner uses to amplify her accordion often threatens to peak and feedback, and Beresford’s adamantine soprano voice reverberates against the skin of the snare drum and provokes a vibration. The modesty of the amplification devices renders this “gig” atmosphere we sought to put on stage: such characteristics, if they are unusual in a theatre venue, are by no means exceptional in the case of musical performance. The amplification system thus contributed to blurring generic distinctions, and

²³⁸ In reference to the *Book of Revelation* in the New Testament.

²³⁹ I choose the term “pressurise” for the way it evokes that sound exerts a palpable, tangible force.

enabled an alternative experience for audiences and performers alike, on a somatic level. Such an experience also enables the thematic content of the show to be communicated on an embodied level. This, combined with a potential identification with the characters, suggests alternative means of constructing a narrative in theatre.

Voices that move

I have examined voice from the perspective of its materiality and physical characteristics, in the way Lambert-wild et al.'s work confers a tactile quality to it, for example. I argue that the work on voice in *Operation Greenfield* can be viewed as a “physical theatres” practice: both for the way it is organically produced and for the repercussions this has on the relationship between movement and intimacy. Sophie Herr's perspectives on the sensuality of voice, an “intimité sensible du corps avec lui-même” (35)²⁴⁰ takes on an interesting colouring when considering what happens *physically* when one speaks in a “character's voice”.²⁴¹ As I mentioned earlier, Herr suggests that this sensitive intimacy is caused by the fact that one's body is touched by itself when breath is out, and separated from itself by the gap caused by air when breath fills one's lungs. This puts flesh in an erotic relationship with itself (37). However, when speaking in a character's voice, questions of intimacy are problematised on a phenomenological level by the mere sonic existence in one's ears, stemming from one's chest, of this *other* voice, both then also in a relationship of “intimité sensible”.

²⁴⁰ “sensitive intimacy of the body with itself”.

²⁴¹ This is the expression used within the company to refer to these ways of speaking that are simultaneously ours and others’.

Changing voice so as to make it a character's own presupposes physical alterations to one's physicality: Violet's voice is pitched higher than mine, it is also more nasal. After the process of finding my character's voice, both on a physical and a metaphorical level (how does Violet speak? What are her favourite expressions?), it was necessary, to find it again in performance, to *locate* it within my physicality. As Leder points out in *The Absent Body*, one's inner bodily functions appear to one in a way that is simultaneously acute and vague (69). In this respect, locating where Violet's voice was coming from, and how it could be reproduced, proved at times more challenging than expected. I think of her voice similarly to how I think of her facial expressions: there is a common element, for me, between Violet's pitch and her high-raised eyebrows, between her voice and her tightly pinched mouth.²⁴² Like when playing an instrument in character, with a physicality slightly other than our own, the fabrication and replication of a character's voice constitutes a physical score, what Foster calls a "specific corporeality" (*Dances That Describe Themselves* 148) shaped by training, rehearsals and practice. When on the 20th of October 2011, a few hours before a performance in Brighton, a monologue I had been performing in my own voice since August 2010 was adapted to be said in Violet's voice, I felt momentarily overwhelmed by the strangeness of hearing the words in another voice. This change had thematic implications for the narrative, but perhaps more surprising was how I could *feel* discomfort as I was (re)discovering the text and experiencing unexpected physical sensations caused

²⁴² Acknowledging this imaged quality of the way I perceive my body in performance also constitutes "remains" of the performance event. More importantly here, images reflect the relationship between the way I perceive myself as an embodied being, and the tools at my disposal to write about it. I owe to Bachelard's concept of "mots vécus", which he links to the phenomenological inquiry and which he analyses as "image poétique" which "rayonne" and "forme[nt] des *espaces de langage*" ("lived words"; "poetic image" that "radiate and form *spaces of language*") (11, emphasis in the original). Images here operate on a phenomenological level.

by the mere execution of the physical techniques I had devised to speak in Violet's voice.

These last two considerations, about the necessity of a pressurised environment where music can be felt, and the physical implications of acting in another voice, suggest an intimate relationship between sounds and physicality. In the first case, audience members are touched by sound in a way that suggests that the narrative content of the piece might be experienced on another level. In this respect, the audience is invited to participate on a microscopic organic level. In the second example, voice acquires a tactile physicality that intimately *touches* the performers themselves, thus blurring delineations of the self.

Non/virtuosity and sincerity

I have examined how music, both live and recorded, resonates in *Operation Greenfield* with the performers' and the characters' intimacies, and how it is *inscribed* into the performers' bodies. In the following section, I analyse how Little Bulb Theatre use movement in *Operation Greenfield* in a way that is non/virtuosic. I argue that this non/virtuosic quality, executed with sincerity and skill, contributes to making *Operation Greenfield* "gently" subversive and suggests novel ways of making "physical theatres" in the UK.

Little Bulb Theatre's alternative acting style

Operation Greenfield is structured like a well-made play: there is a crisis followed by a denouement, scenes of exposition, and the protagonists are all clearly characterised. Each one of them has distinctive physical and behavioural

traits, and is depicted in a way that is caricatured and exaggerated. The characters, and the piece's stylised acting style emerged simultaneously during early improvisations. Little Bulb Theatre share this creative approach with many other "physical theatres" companies, and it constitutes a landmark of devised performance, as noted by Heddon and Milling, among others (7-8). This suggests that the characters were partly shaped by each individual performer's personal history and by the dynamics at work in the company.

The acting style can best be described as a mixture of Stanislavski-inspired naturalism, clown, mime, comedy, storytelling and performance art. Since none of the performers received acting training, each individual acting style was at first slightly different from one another.²⁴³ The fact that no unified acting style was decided beforehand but that an emphasis was put, from the start, on a heightened, artificial kind of acting reflects the lack of formal training of the performers. These characteristics also inscribe this decision in a genealogy of devised work: indeed, devising meant it was "allowed" for the acting style to be un-naturalistic.²⁴⁴ This quality of the acting inscribes it at counter-current of a wide part of the British industry, still predominantly constructed around a Stanislavski or Method Acting-derived technique. Simon Murray adds that the UK theatre tradition having long focussed on the figure of the playwright, it "has placed the *spoken word* at the centre of the theatrical experience". Murray claims that this tendency led to the celebration of "actors with a rich vocal range and

²⁴³ In later work by the company, a more unified acting style was present from the early stages of the process, as in *Orpheus* (2013-2014) or *Squally Showers* (2013), which suggests that the performers more or less consciously trained themselves to being in tune with one another, in the style of the company.

²⁴⁴ Heddon and Milling dedicate a whole chapter to the question of acting, albeit focusing primarily on the experimentations that led to the abandonment of Stanislavski-inspired methodologies. (29-62). In *Acting (Re)Considered*, Phillip B. Zarrilli attributes this shift to several factors, including writings for the stage that challenge an emphasis on psychological motivations (Zarrilli mentions Beckett as an actor of such shift) and a moving away from considerations of acting as solely psychologically motivated (22).

virtuosity which often, however, far exceeded their talent or aptitude for expressive movement and gesture” (*Lecoq* 3). Murray argues this tendency can be seen in the way “British drama schools offering training for the aspiring professional actor have consciously reinforced this perspective by prioritising vocal expertise at the expense of other physical skills” (3). I have already noted how this tendency was still dominant in the curricula of drama schools preparing students for the mainstream industry, most notably RADA. This might also explain the importance of accents – regional and foreign – on British stages, a characteristic altogether absent from French stages.²⁴⁵ Murray’s comments come after he analysed how “physical theatres” were constructed in “reaction” against this “dominant tradition” (3), a characteristic similarly noted by Heddon and Milling (32) and by Phillip B. Zarrilli who notes in *Acting (Re)Considered* a tendency to move away from “psychologically motivated realistic character[s]” (22). The style of acting we display in *Operation Greenfield* goes against a dominant style but is inscribed in a long-standing tradition of devised theatre.

If no conscious decision informed the acting style, which emerged over the course of the devising process, and despite the fact that it *felt* very caricatured, audience members invariably commented on how “true” the characters were. When I interrogated Scott about this characteristic, he summarised how we had all felt at the beginning of the 2010 Edinburgh festival:

²⁴⁵ Whether this is caused by the fact that, unlike the UK, France has not nowadays as many regional accents, by the smaller widespread of the French language as opposed to the hegemony of the English, or by the implied idea that “putting on” an accent would almost undeniably be viewed as racist, the only accents heard in French on mainstream or experimental stages – with the possible exception of amateur theatre – are the ones of the performers. When Wajdi Mouawad’s *Incendies* was performed in France in 2003 with an all-Québécois cast (Mouawad, born in Lebanon, started his theatrical career in Québec), French audiences could distinctly notice the performers’ accents. When Stanislas Nordey directed the piece in 2008 with a French cast and despite the action taking place, in part, in Québec, the company did not perform with an accent. I do not suggest that one option is better than the other, as the British tradition arguably allows a visibility to ethnic and regional minorities that the French one perhaps neglects.

“we thought the choreography was really stylised, and then people [said] ... “oh, you know, it’s so accurate, because that’s how teenagers are”” (“Interview”).²⁴⁶ Similarly, Lyn Gardner states that the company’s “ability to conjure the pains of youth [is] uncanny”, whilst Mary Brennan in her *Herald* critique follows her descriptions of the characters’ “particular fixations” by describing the “cast” as “clearly observant”.

Some audience members, of course, found the acting style deeply alienating: the most memorable example of this was crystallised in the very negative comments from reviewers of the BBC Review Show, aired on August 27th 2010. Film critic Hannah McGill voiced for instance how she felt estranged from characters she did not empathise with, and novelist Hari Kunzru succinctly summarised his opinion in two words: “weird, weird”. However, and to our surprise, most spectators seemed to believe the characters were credible, some of them going as far as mistaking us for them. A woman the same age as I inquired to know what our projects for the future of our Christian Club were, now that, she presumed, we had passed our A-levels; another audience member wondered, after a performance in Leeds in March 2011, if we had a long journey ahead to reach Stokely, the fictional town of the show.

What these reactions illustrate is the concertinaing of different levels of acting that supposes the superimposition of characters and personae. Of course, it is very unlikely that there exists a clear delineation between these “layers”, and the fact that the style as much as the characters were generated from improvisations means such separation might not even always be apparent to the performers themselves. For instance, in the May 2011 version of the script, the

²⁴⁶ It is telling that Scott should refer to the performance as “choreography”. This terminology suffused the whole process, and appropriately describes the nature of both the score we were devising, and Scott’s “micro-managing” direction.

characters' names are used to describe the performers' actions during our adaptation of Górecki's symphony (40). I had however always felt that *we* were playing the scene as ourselves, or as personae. This illustrates the difficulty in delineating these different levels of acting, even amongst ourselves.

The fact that our identity should be mistaken for our characters' suggests that we subvert the "rules" of the genre, in embodying un-naturalistic characters in a naturalistic way. This earnestness, combined with the fact that it is not rare for devised performances to draw on autobiographical material, means that some audience members read it as such. This dimension might have been reinforced by the fact that there was no text prior to the performance,²⁴⁷ and no programme notes that would have given hints as to how to read the piece. These absences might have fuelled the feeling that the characters were not fictional, and seemed to suggest that the company was drawing on autobiographical material.²⁴⁸ This suggests that sincerity in performance might have less to do with a factual dimension than with an implicit pact with one's audience. This dimension of earnestness is essential to the "gently subversive" quality of the work, for it is what enables an intimate experience of the piece, allowing a sense of identification that is fuelled by an embodied sense that one knows what being a teenager *feels* like.

²⁴⁷ The script of the play, available yet forever inaccurate (during runs, changes are made on an almost nightly basis) works in this respect more like what Lavery has termed a "post-script" that exists as a "crossroads of possibilities" and "comes out of the event rather than before it" ("Is there a text" 40)

²⁴⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Libby Worth for suggesting this possible explanation.

Non/virtuosic performances

I have examined how Little Bulb Theatre's acting style in *Operation Greenfield* counteracts the caricatured dimension of the characterisation and grants it honesty. It is a similar movement that informs the more athletic sequences of the show, and principally the physicality displayed in the "montage". Ambitious and fast-paced, it displays skills as much as hard work but can barely be termed "virtuosic". Instead, it is non/virtuosic: virtuosic in its non-virtuosity. I draw here on Judith Hamera's analysis of virtuosity, and Tait's perspectives on the kinaesthetic and phenomenological responses induced by extra-ordinary aerial physicality. I suggest however reversing both frameworks to propose that non/virtuosity operates as a reciprocal of the virtuosic – reciprocal understood in the mathematical sense.

In an article titled "The Romance of Monsters: Theorizing the Virtuoso Body", Hamera explores the relationship between the critic and the virtuoso, questioning the story of "romance" that is hers when confronted with virtuosic physicality. Questioning strategies to write about the virtuosic body, Hamera is concerned with "distanciating [her]self from the usual mystical vocabulary attached to virtuosity" – tales of presence, talent and seemingly effortless superhuman movement. In her words, virtuosity "condenses and emplots a story of onlooking, of engaging corporeal and contextual difference" (147), adding that the virtuoso's "exceptional labouring body" serves as a "screen" onto which the viewer projects "that ongoing, affective identification we observers have with another body enmeshed with our desires, fraught with the fetishes and fantasies and enactments by which we make our own identities" (148).

Little Bulb Theatre's physicality cannot be labelled "virtuosic": movement is caricatured and commonplace, and it is evident that we have not received any dance training. In this respect, our physicality does not highlight what Hamera calls the "corporeal difference" between the virtuoso and the onlooker. But if our physicality is not "exceptional", there is no doubt that ours are "laboring bodies": our short breath and sweat at the end of the sequence constitute very organic, visceral examples of this labour. My rationale for using Hamera's perspective lies in the fact that these – our, my – "laboring bodies" at work in the performance are "not the idealized body of ballet", where the technique is "so hard it looks easy" (150). Little Bulb Theatre's physicality, like the one of Body Weather practitioner Oguri that Hamera examines, "offers a spectacle of a technique that is hard and looks it" (150).²⁴⁹ Hamera explains that "generally, the labor that is dance is exposed by those who clearly have to work at it, that is, those who are ... struggling novices" (150). But can we be called "novices", since the difficulty of the movement we are executing does not lie in the vocabularies chosen, and consequently in our lack of training to achieve them, but in its frantic pace and precise, minute choreography, that looks hardly achievable and that we nonetheless manage to accomplish? Our physicality also displays skills and craft, "laboring bodies" that, to an extent, achieve a virtuosity of *our* craft. It is a "collective" virtuosity, that emerges from the combination of a certain group of people, working together for a long period of time. It is where the "contextual difference" (150) between the performers and the audience lays. It simply happens to be that the craft itself, the movement vocabularies, are less

²⁴⁹ Hamera argues that Oguri's physicality turns him into a "monster", for the way it is virtuosic yet effortful (148).

dependent on remarkable physicality and training, what would be our “corporeal difference”, than on the context in which they were produced.

These considerations have influenced my decision to coin a term that reflects and delineates the tension between the reciprocal notions of virtuosity and non-virtuosity that the physicality of the “montage” simultaneously interrogates. When used to talk about dance, the term “non-virtuosic” most commonly designates choreographies that place greater emphasis on pedestrian movement. This evidently does not apply to our physicality in the “montage”: the choreography is composed of moves that are caricatured and apparently easily reproducible, yet they are not pedestrian. Whilst the term “anti-virtuosic” is also inadequate, examples of its use provide a rich background that, as a discussion on “physical theatre” had informed my decision to coin “physical theatres”, nurture the reasoning behind the adoption of a new terminology.

In an article on the composition of Iannis Xenakis, pianist and scholar Marc Couroux uses the term to describe a technique that requires so much virtuosity that it becomes unachievable, thus the choice of anti- as a prefix that underlines the opposition between such unattainability and the mere concept of virtuosity. Francesca Brittan, as we have seen, uses the term to explore examples of musical and performative failures and the subsequent pleasure audiences find in seeing the struggle of the performer with the possibility of failing at skills s/he does not master (112). I add to these dimensions that, if they cannot apply directly to Little Bulb Theatre’s physicality, they constitute what makes it non/virtuosic, a “meta-virtuosic” quality of the gently ironic physicality we display. The prefix meta- highlights how the virtuosity of the movement used in the show constitutes a commentary on the idea of virtuosity itself. Taking these

terminological considerations as a starting point, I use the term “non/virtuosic”, with the forward stroke crystallising the juxtaposition between both notions of the “virtuosic” and the “non-virtuosic”, highlighting that non/virtuosity constitutes a commentary on itself while playing with audiences’ expectations. Little Bulb Theatre’s physicality in the show, especially exemplified by this sequence, exposes a physicality that is at the same time everyone’s, drawing on specifically caricatured movement vocabularies that are instantly acknowledged by most of the audience, and extremely specific, indeed unique. When the virtuoso turns, in Hamera’s words, into a “sacred monster”, a body who “rewrites plots of possibility for other bodies even while demonstrating the inability of other bodies, ... to execute this virtuous discipline themselves” (149), our performance proposes similar “plots of possibility” while demonstrating the ability, and I should add, the potentiality, for others to execute the choreography. Little Bulb Theatre’s non/virtuosity achieves an aim reciprocal to the one suggested by Hamera: it leads to a feeling of sameness, the idea that these four caricatured teenagers actually say something of *everybody*’s adolescence.²⁵⁰

Suggesting that Hamera’s framework can be used to speak about non/virtuosity, I now develop a theoretical framework reciprocal to Tait’s analysis of the somatic responses aerial acts trigger for audience members. The heightened labouring, to paraphrase Hamera, of Little Bulb Theatre’s physicality bears the potentiality for spectators of what Tait terms “to viscerally perceive[] the physicality of ... [other bodies] in a process of oscillating identification and disidentification with [their] cultural identity” (141). Tait’s analysis is useful here

²⁵⁰ I am not claiming any sense of universality of Little Bulb Theatre’s movement vocabularies, bearing in mind that audiences vary highly from place to place. I decide to put the word *everybody* in italics here so as to highlight it conceptually: as opposed to the notion of exceptionality that would accompany discourses on virtuosity. Here, *everyone* is included, whether their knowledge of physicality is exceptional or mundane.

on two levels: first, because it acknowledges the “cultural identity” of the movement vocabularies used on stage, and the prism through which audience members receive such performance. The oscillation she evokes between identification and disidentification is, in the case of *Operation Greenfield*, heightened by the movement vocabularies chosen in the devising process. The stylised physicality of the characters, who evolve on a grid, as if two-dimensional, is echoed by the deadpan tone in which the characters deliver their lines. A large portion of these movement vocabularies draws on cartoon-like depictions of situations that would be familiar to most audience members in the UK: the physicality of church service, dancing at a school party in a village hall... The fact that such “vignettes” resonated for many audience members echoes what Tait names “intertextuality in performance” (142). Tait argues that “a performing body is received with bodily sensations linked to prior experiences combining physiological and psychological activity”. The stilted, stiff, awkward body language of the characters, carried on during the very fast-paced and energetic “montage” sequence, found echoes in spectators in memories of past awkwardness, past adolescent stiffness as “each spectator brings his or her accumulated personal and social histories of body movement and motion to live [...] action, and these become absorbed into further live experiences of motion” (144). Through the use of a heightened physical score, Little Bulb Theatre’s movement vocabularies trigger a sense of reciprocity, of sameness in audience members, linking in an intimate loop audience’s embodied memory with the characters and the labouring bodies of the performers.

Conclusive remarks

Operation Greenfield is characterised by a heightened, choreographed physicality, displayed in danced sequences: the “montages”, and in the general acting style of the piece. The presence of both live and recorded music is explored physically, in a way that questions ideas of intimacy and suggests a recalibration of the notion of touch. A similar movement superimposes fictional and presentational spaces and different levels of acting. These characteristics create an uncertainty as to whether the show constitutes an autobiographical attempt or not. In this regard, *Operation Greenfield* challenges notions and expectations of authenticity and honesty in performance whilst remaining earnest. It is a similar endeavour that subtends Little Bulb Theatre’s playful non/virtuosity. Part of the reason that informed this decision is a half-conscious desire to bend if not conventions, at least expectations about physicality in theatre. Scott mentions how he intended the show’s physicality to parody a type of physical performance “suspicious for it can become self-important, but can also be really beautiful” (“Interview”). He adds that this is

the problem with pretentious theatre, theatre with pretention, ‘cause you want to take an audience to a beautiful place and to show them amazing feats of movement but at the same time, by doing that, you’re sort of saying unavoidably that this is an elite, and that can be a bit cringe-worthy. (“Interview”)

The desire to “take an audience to a beautiful place” is very much what lies at the core of Little Bulb Theatre’s artistic intentions. Scott also strongly

believes in displaying skills in a piece of theatre: musical abilities and physical challenges that look and are “hard” for the performers, in an echo of Hamera’s words. It is in this gap, this tension between the display of skills and the rejection of a pretentious stance, that rests Little Bulb Theatre’s non/virtuosity. It is in this tension that the neologism takes on full meaning and highlights the effect of “gentle” subversion – of generic codes and modes of representation – the company’s “physical theatres” provoke.

The non/virtuosic dimension here at work is inscribed in a genealogy of anti-virtuosity in performance that *Operation Greenfield* both nods towards and works against. I have already mentioned how Brittan identifies the punk movement and the folk revival as originating from a desire for the music to be accessible. She explains that “[t]he folk movement situated itself in opposition to both the bourgeois classical tradition and the mass-marketing associated with pop song. It equated the raw and the inept with the real and the good – it located failure in the same space as authenticity” (118). Brittan points out the inevitable slippage between a “militant[] anti-virtuosity” and the processes of commodification at work in both the production and “the marketing of [these] genres” (125). Musical failure becomes in this case a commodity which has to be reproduced to remain an “authentic” expression – of the genre, of the people. Brittan concludes her essay by noting the importance in current Western culture of failure as commodification, taking as an example the growing success of the rejects of reality show *American Idol*. I noted how, to an extent, Told by an Idiot’s display of a well-rehearsed failure in *You Can’t Take It With You* had worked in the sense of such a commodification. Brittan argues that the success of these “rejects” lies in the public’s hunger “not just for humour (the ridiculous,

the slapstick) but for genuine anti-virtuosity (the human, the flawed)” (126). If failure might turn as “generic” as success has before it – the reason why, for Brittan, failure is so seductive at the moment - it however represents a current tendency for the way “it still offers us breathing room; it still admits the possibility of the idiosyncratic, the weird” (128).

Little Bulb Theatre’s non/virtuosity fits yet disrupts this trend. The work of the company certainly echoes something of the current Zeitgeist, however, and this is what is important, we do not reject the virtuosic. Instead, Little Bulb Theatre display skills and feats of movement that allow space for failure, for the human, humour and ridicule. These skills are “virtuosic” in the way they require hours of rehearsals – what I have analysed as constituting the company’s “spatial capital”, yet they open up the possibility for audiences to see the human being behind them. In this emphasis on *another* sort of virtuosity, Little Bulb Theatre’s movement vocabularies in *Operation Greenfield* gently disrupt both “generic” virtuosity and “trendy” anti-virtuosity. The fact that this is done with as much earnestness as possible might be what integrates audiences in an somatic, embodied experience of the performance that constitutes, too, an act of “gentle” subversion as it opens up perspectives for other ways of being together.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION: MAKING AND SHARING A SPACE TO BE “HUMAN”

I have examined how movement, understood as both the literal and metaphorical dynamics that run through what I have defined as “physical theatres”, challenges divisions between ideas of inside and outside, redefining notions of the private and the collective. Movement is explored in this thesis as a physical dimension, but also as what allows audience and performers to be *moved*, on a somatic level that connects with an emotional dimension. The methodology used in this thesis reflects the questions I examine, drawing on dance ethnography and bilingualism. Taken as a critical tool, the idea of movement allows critical fluidity, opening up zones of friction, tension and paradox rather than providing definitive circumscribed answers.

I have argued that movement, used as a dynamic impulse in “physical theatres”, has the potential of generating alternative ways of making performance and can give rise to subversive codes of representation. The terms “alternative” and “subversive” were understood in their common usage. The examples I have examined in this thesis have all suggested alternative, renewed ways of making theatre, with an aim of providing a different experience for their audience. In all four case studies, they have succeeded, albeit through different means depending on the context where they were deployed. Arguably too, the alternatives some provided would not have been deemed subversive or radical had they taken place in another context.

My decision to focus on “physical theatres” inevitably owed to the necessity of restricting the field of study and to personal preference. It was however especially motivated by the realisation that “physical theatres” are omnipresent in the United Kingdom, yet unmapped in France, despite France’s long-standing history of championing pioneers and international theatre-makers that were to dramatically influence “physical theatres” in the UK. As I suggested in Chapter 1, many practical and philosophical reasons explain this discrepancy. Importantly, this difference between the one and the other context underlines how either country understands what it is to make theatre, and to experience theatre as an audience member, at this moment in time. Focusing on “physical theatres” allows a reflexion on a type of performance and performance-making that has been predominant in the UK for the past two and a half decades. My intention has not been to redefine the boundaries of the genre or to suggest alternative terminologies to reflect an ever-expanding and forever protean category of work. Rather, I have examined the way “physical theatres” can subtly renew themselves whilst penetrating the more visible and established parts of the British theatre industry. I have highlighted that the appeal for UK audiences is a “human” dimension that goes along with a claim for authenticity and spontaneity. Using the term “physical theatres” in the British context, and despite the suspicion of many theatre-makers for what the term supposedly covers, allows to examine distinct types of performance that all have in common a focus on physicality, corporeality and collective authorship. Because of its long-standing history and the many debates it is associated with, the term continues to be relevant, albeit in a renewed understanding of the plurality of genres and experiments it covers. It also allows to circumscribe a category of

work that challenges an “ocular-centric” tradition and acknowledges the central importance of the sentient body in knowledge building processes. In this respect, the term covers a multiplicity of practices that provide tools for a renewed experience of performance, and of physicality in performance.

The decision to examine in mirror the French context was motivated by a desire to make the British context “alien” and to bring the French context “closer”. The comparison, made from a perspective that was coined in the UK, provides a different framework from the dominant frames of analysis in French criticism and allowed me to examine a part of the French theatrical production that remains unnamed and therefore unmapped. Bringing together a “micro-” and a “macrotextual” trend of criticism, in Finburgh and Lavery’s terms (5), this thesis allowed the familiar to be examined through a “foreign” perspective and the alien to be looked at with familiarity, in a process of *alienation*. The comparison therefore starts tracing the outline of a type of theatre that, relatively invisible in France, remains by an effect of ricochet often absent from studies of contemporary French theatre published in English.

These characteristics were explored using a methodology that encompassed a somatic and felt dimension. Writing from the embodied perspective of a practitioner – of spectatorship, but also as a theatre-maker – has meant locating forms of knowledge and expertise that are embodied.

“Physical theatres” at each end of the spectrum: Escale and Lambert-wild et al.

The “physical theatres” examined in this thesis question and challenge ways of making theatre, depending on their position within the one and the other

context. They also all interrogate the ways in which audiences can experience and be a part of the theatrical event. Being a comparison, this study implies that parallels and differences can be identified between each example. The two examples taken from the French context, consciously drawn from distinct areas of the theatre industry, surprisingly echo each other. Escale on the one hand and Lambert-wild et al. on the other operate within very different networks: the former is connected to circus and street theatre and operates at the periphery of the French theatrical context whereas the second is visible and is a part of an institutional structure. Despite the fact that they produce very different work, the two share an interdisciplinary approach, a focus on corporeality and a collective mode of authorship. Both also strive to facilitate, for their audience, an experience of live performance that encompasses more than a visual sense. Practical constraints – Escale’s work needs to be transportable whilst Lambert-wild et al. have at their disposal a permanent structure and consequential public funding – and each company’s artistic inclination means that these interdisciplinary vocabularies take different forms.

These common characteristics inscribe them both in the field I have delimited as “physical theatres”. This denomination allows for the consideration of these two companies through the same prism, which in turn highlights how both draw the outlines of a type of performance that is minority and nameless in France. As I suggested at the beginning of this thesis, the lack of a terminology for these practices does not rule out their existence, but means that they remain unmapped. This does not imply that they are excluded: for example, both receive regular public funding. They are not ignored as theatre-makers – Jean Lambert-wild’s nomination as director of Centre Dramatique National of Caen clearly

illustrates this point – but as “physical theatres” makers. This in turn suggests an awareness on their part that making “physical theatres” in France, and especially from within the institution, as in the case of Lambert-wild et al., constitutes an alternative to the dominant theatre production.

For Escale, *itinérance* constitutes the cornerstone of their aesthetics and of their way of life: it is what informs and justifies their “physical theatres”. *Itinérance* disrupts spaces and the everyday order of the communities they settle in. I have examined how, paradoxically, Escale’s *itinérance* complies with a “sedentarist metaphysics”, despite its claims to upset the status quo. However, the company’s commitment to a life that is in accordance with their ideological beliefs, and with what the company perceives as an ethical and coherent way of living, grants a level of radicalism to their lifestyle. Within the context where Escale evolve, itself complying with a “sedentarist metaphysics”, their *itinérance* radically evokes freedom, to paraphrase Kershaw, and is perceived as such. In this respect, the movement at the base of their project is partially subversive. The most efficient element of Escale’s *itinérance* might be the tent, which challenges boundaries between notions of inside and outside, and enables audience members and performers to share a collective intimacy on a somatic and physiological level. Lambert-wild et al.’s work, on the other hand, is characterised by spaces that need to be sedentary, yet that become porous under the influence of the intermedial layers that constitute Lambert-wild et al.’s “physical theatres”. In that respect, the spaces of Lambert-wild et al. challenge strict boundaries between openness and closure despite their inherently strict physical boundaries.

Escale’s physicality is informed by *itinérance*. It is the dynamic that redefines Escale’s spaces as collectively intimate. *Itinérance* is also imprinted

onto Escale's bodies, in a way that, as in the case of Krausse, opens up the potential for subversive "gestures", to use Noland's terminology, and operates on an embodied, somatic level. The work of Lambert-wild et al. on the other hand, subverts notions of intimacy by *displacing* movement, a dynamic that redefines physicality on stage. This dynamic of *displacement* is also what informs a redefinition of tactility. The way Lambert-wild et al. use sound for instance, and especially the sound of voice, allows what Paterson calls a "proximal knowledge" (781) that goes beyond the visual and blurs distinctions between the intimate and the shared, the inside and the outside, the organic and the inanimate. Such a redefined tactility problematises clear boundaries between self and other, enabling on a phenomenological level a dimension of collective intimacy. It is a similar dynamic that subtends Lambert-wild's project of "to be and to think so as to disappear", a maxim that epitomises the subversive "fantasised autobiography" he is constructing on a scale of his lifetime.

What both France-based companies also share is the belief that the theatre they make reflects and is informed by a political commitment. This dimension is very clearly acknowledged in both Escale and Lambert-wild's rhetoric: both view theatre as a means of discussing and challenging ways of living and working together, on a societal scale. Both also embed a politicised message in their shows and/or the material that surrounds their productions. I have suggested at the beginning of this thesis that a significant amount of French theatre is preoccupied by a political dimension, despite the fact that, as analysed by Finburgh and Lavery, an important part of this production is "politically neutralized" (11). While neither Escale's nor Lambert-wild et al.'s shows deal directly with a political content, these artists consider their work as inscribed

within a project of a political nature, aiming at suggesting alternative models of social organisation. For Escale, this consists in proposing a model for another way of living, of making work, and for speaking out. For Lambert-wild, it is about integrating audiences in a project that has the potential to “mouvoir et rassembler une communauté” (“Personal Interview” 2010).²⁵¹ This quote epitomises Lambert-wild et al.’s work: suggesting alternative models for making work, and experiencing theatre, has the potential to *move* audiences and to generate communities. Both examples can be analysed through what Finburgh and Lavery have called “a political reading of form” (13). Importantly, this highlights how in both cases, “physical theatres” enable the transmission of a politicised message, in a way that is embodied and sensorially experienced.

Tracing the outline of a trend: Told by an Idiot and Little Bulb Theatre

Not only did the fieldwork I conducted on the French companies inform the methodology of this thesis, it also partly influenced the decision to take Told by an Idiot and Little Bulb Theatre as case studies for the UK context. At the start of this project, both companies interestingly mirrored, by their position within the British theatre industry, Escale’s and Lambert-wild’s position in the French context. However, they did so only to an extent: the distinction between, on the one side, Jean Lambert-wild as a theatre-maker who is part of France’s cultural institutions and Escale, who operate on the margins of the industry, and on the other side, Told by an Idiot and Little Bulb Theatre who actually operate on the same spectrum of experimental performance practices in the UK, is of course more complex. It should also be underlined that the comparison is

²⁵¹ “To move and to bring together a community of people”.

problematized, for I have examined a company's whole oeuvre in the case of the French companies, but have focused on one specific piece only in the case of either British companies. The rationale for electing an established company, and a (then) less visible company in each context was to examine how their position within the context had an influence on the way they used movement. The comparison highlights how across either theatre contexts, there are artists who, regardless of their position, use movement to coin alternative theatrical vocabularies, albeit with different levels of success.

What this study has identified is that the two British companies share several common characteristics, including first their capacity for mobility, heavily influenced by the economic restrictions of a context where a small sized company needs to tour work to make their existence viable. As suggested by Carmichael, this dimension was especially present in the early years of *Told by an Idiot*, and in both cases it has informed the company's aesthetics. Both *Told by an Idiot* and Little Bulb Theatre's creative processes, which are collaborative and constructed around a shared ownership of the work, also constitute a dimension where movement is central. However, if in the French context this dimension is relatively unusual, it is far from exceptional in the British context. The two companies also focus on a pragmatic approach to presentational spaces, putting props and sets in movement to constantly re-create fictional spaces. In the case of *You Can't Take It With You*, this creates theatre spaces that are "unreliable", albeit in a way that is formulaic, whilst in Little Bulb Theatre's *Operation Greenfield*, it is testament to the company's acquisition of a "spatial capital". Such "spatial capital" is made possible by repeated practice and

therefore an embodied knowledge of the piece that is inherently ours as it is composed of multiple layers accumulated over time and reiterated practice.

The question of intimacy is explored through the two companies' use of movement, and particularly in the way they use physicality to *move* their audiences. Both companies, albeit in different ways, construct their shows around an idea of earnestness and authenticity. In the case of Told by an Idiot's *You Can't Take It With You*, these dimensions became commodified, whilst in the case of Little Bulb Theatre, they participate in a process of "gentle subversion".

Finally, and this sharply contrasts with the companies based in France, when both Escale and Lambert-wild et al. develop means of making and performing theatre that are inscribed in a political project, neither Told by an Idiot nor Little Bulb Theatre claim to be interested in making theatre that is political. The former in fact expressed on several occasions their reluctance in making work that had a "message", while Little Bulb Theatre were adamant to remain on the fence with *Operation Greenfield*. This echoes Brian Logan's observations on the relative absence of politically-committed devised theatre (Logan). I argue, by contrast, that there are contemporary devised theatre pieces in the UK that actively deal with social or political issues: Nic Green's *Trilogy* constitutes an excellent example, but so does the work of The Paper Birds or Chris Thorpe, for instance. Where Logan's commentary rings true is in pinpointing that the political is absent from the kind of devised work that use movement and characters to tell "stories", and indeed, whilst Green's *Trilogy* constitutes a danced lecture, The Paper Birds draw on a verbatim theatre tradition and Thorpe on spoken word. In this respect, it seems that the trend of "physical

theatres” that focuses on creating narratives is concerned, instead, with generating an experience that feels human and humane: that focuses on details of the human condition and advocates honesty and proximity. This distancing of “physical theatres” companies from a political message in their work, when historically they were often strongly politicised, owes perhaps to the increasing blurring between “alternative” and “mainstream” contexts. The “alternative” is perhaps less than before in a position where it matters to inscribe oneself in the margins, or in opposition to the dominant culture, especially since the distinction between the two contexts seems more obsolete than ever. I will highlight however how these “physical theatres”, on both sides of the Channel, provide an embodied form of political subversion.

Cross-pollination across the Channel: embodied and moving politics.

It could be argued that an analysis between the “established” companies of each country and the “fringe” ones could be of interest. The main argument against this lies in the fact that the position occupied by each company within its national context is inherently different from one another, and that distinctions between which company is “visible” and which one is not are anything but straightforward, especially in the British context. The mere characteristics that define the “established” companies are importantly informed by either national cultural policy: Lambert-wild benefits from his status as director of a CDN whilst Told by an Idiot continue to seek rehearsal and performance spaces, along with funding, on a project to project basis. The same applies to comparing Little Bulb Theatre and Escale: the latter have indeed been working for the past twenty-five years and have been a constant presence in the French street arts

networks whilst Little Bulb Theatre have not had the same longevity, but have had a wider and more diverse exposure.

One characteristic however links Little Bulb Theatre and Escale: both companies share an interest in bringing their work to rural areas, and more importantly, have been touring using their own means of transportation for several years, with the life changes that it implies.²⁵² For Escale, this decision was mainly informed by a desire from the company to own a space and to operate according to their own timeline. It also presumably meant the company was more likely to get public funding, benefiting from the various “aides” available for circus and street performance artists. The decision to become *itinérant* might then have also been informed by a realistic recognition that this would inscribe them in circus and street arts networks, that could by extension provide a more secure life for the company’s “physical theatres”.

For Little Bulb Theatre, the decision was both economic and motivated by the intention of bringing their work to other audiences. In the case of Escale, *itinérance* constitutes its own subversive model: the way the company puts their *itinérant* lifestyle on display when settling in a town contributes to making their lifestyle appear as what Kershaw terms “radical” (*The Radical* 18), albeit with reservations, as we have seen. The same does not apply to Little Bulb Theatre (or Told by an Idiot at their inception). The company tours from venue to venue and does not put their specific lifestyle on display. Little Bulb Theatre are itinerant for they are mobile; Escale on the other hand are *itinérant* in the French sense of the term, where it defines a specific lifestyle. That the former owes more to the economic climate than to a desire to lead a life coherent with one’s political

²⁵² I personally toured *Operation Greenfield* with Little Bulb Theatre across the UK, but was not a part of the company’s rural touring projects, which respectively took place in Spring 2011 and 2012.

ideals does not alter the fact that touring companies, albeit to a lesser extent than *itinérant* ones, propose an alternative to a sedentary lifestyle. Whilst Escale's lifestyle is perceived as radical for the way, as Kershaw analyses, it "invokes ... freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association" (18), Little Bulb Theatre's one rather evokes such freedom. On the other hand, it might highlight a more radical way of living, for it is less conditioned by choice than by economic and social necessity. It goes against a "sedentary" metaphysics, but on an underground level. Little Bulb Theatre do not claim their lifestyle is radical, but living and working in a way that is at counter-current with dominant forms of organisation is in itself potentially subversive. A more in-depth comparison of itinerant and *itinérantes* companies, in France and in the UK, is beyond the scope of this thesis. It would however provide a rich field of study, focusing on examining how these artists integrate mobility and movement as an inherent part of their working life, and how private and professional, intimate and collective lives interweave. What it suggests is that a life in movement, on the roads, and the subsequent sharing of private spaces it is likely to infer – whether it be the confined space of a caravan or the shared "digs" of touring companies - tends to redefine intimacy as collective and the collective as intimate, thus proposing an alternative to dominant and sedentary conceptions of intimacy. In this respect, the lifestyle of these companies partake in what I define as "physical theatres". They advocate and promote ways of living and working together that are grounded in a collective intimacy. Such a collective intimacy operates on a phenomenological level, challenging dominant individualistic schematas. In the case of Little Bulb Theatre and Escale – but also Lambert-wild et al., albeit to a different extent – friendship, trust and proximity become embodied tools for

making performance, in a way that binds together the private and professional lives of the participants and proposes different models for living and working together.

Whilst the comparison between each individual case study and between the two national contexts highlighted how either context differs in its relationship with “physical theatres”, and how “physical theatres” practitioners position themselves differently depending on the context, it also illustrates the presence of an undercurrent that irrigates “physical theatres” in both France and the UK. In all four examples, using movement as a creative process and as an aesthetic tool contributes to blurring distinctions between the different spaces of the theatre. Escale build their theatre from an “outside” space and re-define notions of “home”; the hypermedial quality at work in Lambert-wild’s pieces blurs the delineation between virtual and actual dimensions, creating a synaesthetic theatrical experience. Told by an Idiot acknowledge the craft at work in their theatre and set their spaces in constant movement, creating a theatre that is “unreliable”; Little Bulb Theatre in *Operation Greenfield* construct spaces that constantly overlap between the presentational, the technical and the fictional, in a way that blurs distinctions between performers and characters.

Each case study arguably proposes an inherently different form of “physical theatres”. Yet each one of these “physical theatres” uses movement in a way that challenges notions of corporeality. This is illustrated by the way tactility is redefined, allowing subtler forms of contact: for example, the marks left upon the performers’ fingers by the practice of instruments as characters as an evidence of such touch. Touch is also questioned and redefined, in a phenomenological dimension, in the way Lambert-wild et al. displace movement

and inscribe corporeity in voice. In this respect, their hypermedial “physical theatres” coin alternative modes of somatic attention in the theatre. In the case of their production of *You Can't Take It With You*, Told by an Idiot have on the other hand, enabled an embodied experience for their audience, yet one that does not disrupt the status quo and that instead complied with processes of commodification.

What the questioning and blurring of spatial delineations, but also the recalibration of corporeality, tactility and physicality in “physical theatres” suggest, is a search from these artists for alternative modes of representation and interaction with audiences, that permit, on a phenomenological level, the construction of a collective intimacy. This, in turn, enables the construction of a community, for the length of the experience, that challenges boundaries between self and other and puts in practice, in an embodied way, a subversive political dimension, proposing alternative ways for humans to *be together*.

Towards a new narrative theatre

What these “physical theatres”, when successful, provide on a somatic and phenomenological level is echoed by a renewed concern for narratives, a trend that is visible in all four case studies. These companies’ work towards being “human” together is complemented by a desire to tell stories. This tendency was noted by Patrice Pavis who, in an article reflecting on the 2010 edition of the Avignon festival, identifies a movement of “retour de la

narration”.²⁵³ Pavis defines “narration” as being both “*narrative discourse*” (English and italics in the original), the way theatre tells a story, and the result of this narration: what Pavis calls “la fable”, the story (1).²⁵⁴ Through a close examination of eight examples, including Lambert-wild and al.’s *La Mort d’Adam*, Pavis reaches the conclusion that one can identify both a “volonté de raconter” and “un désir d’entendre une histoire” (18).²⁵⁵ Pavis thus notes that “variations postdramatiques” seem to have been appropriated and that there is now a desire to go beyond them (18). Where I disagree with Pavis is when he suggests that there is no return to the well-made play, with well-defined characters and dramatic actions (18). I argue instead that in the “physical theatres” I have analysed, with the exception of Lambert-wild et al.’s work, both “well-defined characters” and “dramatic actions” are a part of the work. They can also prove formally subversive, as in the case of *Operation Greenfield*, where the codes of dramatic theatre have been appropriated and reconfigured.

The “physical theatres” I have explored in this thesis have integrated postdramatic codes of representation: the “dream images” and the “synaesthesia” (84) that Lehmann identifies as defining “postdramatic” theatres, the “simultaneity of signs” (87) and the “density” of such signs (89), are all encountered here: in the hypermedial setting of Lambert-wild et al.’s work, in the “montages” of *Operation Greenfield*, in the somatic experiences that Escale’s tent allow, and with the exception of Told by an Idiot’s *You Can’t Take It With You*. In all four cases though, the “primacy of the text” (21) is rejected. However, unlike in postdramatic theatre, where the “actor’s body ... refuses to serve

²⁵³ “A return of narration”.

²⁵⁴ Pavis proposes to understand it as being simultaneously the “*plot*” and the “*story*”. (English and italics in original).

²⁵⁵ “a will to narrate”, “a desire to hear a story”.

signification” (95), movement and corporeality in all four case studies are used as part of the coinage of narratives. They create characters in the case of Told by an Idiot and Little Bulb Theatre, they allow for a political message to be transmitted on a phenomenological level in the work of Escale, they participate in the multi-layering of sensorial layers that composes the “poème en prose” structure of a piece like *La Mort d’Adam* (Pavis, “L’Ecriture à Avignon” 15). What Lehmann identifies as a “tendency towards “disinvolvement” and ironic sarcastic distance” (118) is here counter-balanced by an interest in performances that are earnest and authentic, especially in the case of the British companies. These examples illustrate how, in all four examples, postdramatic techniques have been adopted and integrated into the construction of a narrative. However, instead of constructing narratives on a linear plane, all four companies create dramas that need to be experienced in-depth and in a way that is embodied, albeit with different levels of success. A narrative arc emerges from the sum of all the parts, a density of sensorial layers, thematic and aesthetic, that compose the piece. In this respect, these “physical theatres” provide renewed ways of making performances, promoting sensorial embodied experiences and rejecting an “ocular-centric” dominant tradition.

In an essay on the contemporary American novel, Nicoline Timmer analyses what she terms a “post-postmodern” tendency. This involves, according to Timmer, an appropriation of postmodern codes and a “move” away from “the postmodern perspective on subjectivity” (13). This movement translates as the development of “new narrative strategies” where “postmodern techniques are still used ... [but] they have simply come to function as “realistic” devices” (360). Timmer analyses this shift as emerging from what she terms “a desire for

some form of community” and the promotion of “sharing ... as a way to identify with others” (359). This digression is not intended to draw parallels between contemporary literature and the “physical theatres” I have examined. However, it identifies a trend in contemporary artistic expressions in the Western world that involves a shift towards defining alternative ways of representing the self, and towards recalibrating subjectivity, the collective, and what it might mean to be human, today and together. A focus on intimacy is pertinent, as it is one of the *topoi* of the 21st century: the celebration of the individual, combined with increased interrogations regarding the public displays of one’s privacy that digitised societies enable, all contribute to highlighting the preponderance of these questions. One of the responses to the increased amount of influences that contemporary subjectivities are experiencing seems to materialise in a claim for authenticity, perceptible in several areas of both the French and the British society. France’s taste for a *vieille France* inspired gastronomy, and the release every year of films that romanticise the France of the past, or the UK’s enthusiasm for the “Great British summer” of 2012, epitomised by tricoloured bunting and street parties, all partake in this movement. Focusing in this respect on a sense of the intimate in “physical theatres” suggests identifying how a tendency that runs through several areas of contemporary culture is dealt with, and possibly subverted, in experimental performance. These “physical theatres” certainly underline a return to the human, through a redefinition of authenticity, the intimate, the collective, and suggesting that the theatre might be the place where participants can *move* one another, on a narrative and a phenomenological level. “Physical theatres” question and challenge notions of intimacy, physicality and blur boundaries between “Self” and “other”, through a recalibrated notion of

tactility. By suggesting an experience of both performance-making and spectatorship that encompasses an embodied dimension and strives to create a collective, embodied intimacy, these forms of performance advocate alternative ways of living, working and being together. The moving intimacies that these “physical theatres” display and interrogate all work towards redefining the theatre as a place for collective intimacy, a place for the emergence of a community of humans, to paraphrase Jean Lambert-wild. A place where *we* can all be human.

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