

The Ballad of Isosceles: Three Phases of Research

PHASE ONE: INITIAL PERFORMANCE AND PUBLICATION OF SCORE

This PaR enquiry began as a performance wherein two spectators were cast as ‘one-to-one’ spectators within the same event and temporal frame. As an enquiry, this sits in a field of practices that mobilise the one-to-one encounter within larger performance events including Ontroerend Goed (BE), Dries Verhoeven (NL), Hannah Hurtzig (DE), Rosana Cade (UK) and Brian Lobel (UK). The first iterative cycle of this enquiry began with a commission from Contact Theatre for its 2015 Sensored Festival. The enquiry sought to investigate how to stage certain moments of ‘agonistic relation’ (*qua* Mouffe 2013) between audience members via a performance’s dramaturgical structure and spatial design. Rather than cultivating a homogeneous spectatorial relationship, my interest here was in creating a heterogenous set of relations (“agonistic” in that they are at odds with each other) that shift over the course of the piece. These shifts between attention, neglect, distance and proximity are written into the text and stage directions and were explored initially through the live performances at Contact Theatre, FIX15 Biennale of Live Performance (Belfast), and the Digital Performance Lab (DPL) (Salford). This phase’s output is **[Item 4: Phase One Output (Ballad of Isosceles Artist’s Pages published in peer-reviewed journal Performance Research)]** and its accompanying set of photos **[Item 5: Photo Documentation for Phase One]** which restage certain key moments in which the performer of the piece sets the two audience members in a particular relationship of voyeurism, envy, neglect or attention in relation with each other.

Methodologically, the first phase of this enquiry was relatively inchoate, driven primarily by the demands of particular venues and contexts, but it culminated in the realization that a more formal approach to scenography and lighting design might extend the piece’s thematic concerns and impact. Incorporating a ‘shadow audience’ (which I began to experiment with at the D.P.L. show) began to deal with the very practical concerns of small-capacity performance not being as tourable or accessible as those intended for larger audiences. Adding the option of witnessing the piece without risking the participatory element of eye contact or close proximity with the performer not only expands the *amount* of people who can see the work, but also appeals to those audience members who might never attend work with explicit performer contact but are nevertheless curious. I began to consider how adding this second level of ‘shadow’ audience not only works thematically in the piece due to its focus on envy and voyeurism, but also begins to address some more pragmatic and industry-led concerns around the one-to-one performance’s narrow appeal. How can small-capacity/participatory performance open itself out to those audience members who may not be able (emotionally or physically) to experience its vicissitudes directly, but who might be open to experiencing the piece vicariously? This led me to two discoveries:

- 1) I realized that *thinking scenographically* about the piece was necessary in order for it to achieve and extend its original aims. How can scenographic and lighting design work to extend the piece’s thematic undercurrents of voyeurism and triangulation? I investigate this in Phase Two.
- 2) Beyond the live piece, *how might a bespoke piece of video documentation create an experience for a remote observer* that simulates *and expands* the piece’s original atmosphere? I investigate this in Phase Three.

PHASE TWO: THINKING SCENOGRAPHICALLY

The piece’s second phase commenced in autumn 2018, when I took up the first of these two questions. Thanks to Arts Council funding and a residency at Sir John Cass School of Art

and Architecture @ London Metropolitan University, I worked with designer Marty Langthorne to develop a cohesive lighting design and spatial setup that extended the piece's thematic and conceptual concerns into the realm of 'expanded scenography' (see McKinney and Palmer 2017). The results are visible in our lighting design pack, which I would encourage the reader to view alongside this reflection as the output from this second phase **[Item 6: Phase Two Output (New Lighting/Scenographic Design)]**. I made certain key decisions at this point beyond the design itself, including:

- the minimum space required between the performer and the two primary audience members in any touring set up in order to establish a relationship of distance in contrast to a relationship of direct proximity
- light became another 'performer' onstage with whom I interacted at certain key moments in order to draw out thematic content and establish boundaries between the worlds of 'singing from a distance' and 'speaking up close' that are then stretched over time by my journey from one to another
- precise viewpoints and lighting states for the shadow audience in order to heighten their position as a vicarious one

McKinney & Palmer define 'expanded scenography' as concerning 'the potential of the material in performance; meanwhile, the affective register that emerges is in part a result of this new-found appreciation of materials and what they can do' (2017, p. 13). The particularly alchemical nature of small-scale performances and their interaction with audience echoes McKinney & Palmer's understanding of spectators as materials whose presence 'becomes part of [a piece] in its expansion' (ibid.). They highlight 'relationality' as a key principle of this expanded scenography, defining it as the new and re-imagined intersubjective exchanges that occur through its mechanics (8); the insight here is into how positioning spectators in a particular physical relation in space can shape phenomenological experience and atmosphere into what Gernot Böhme has called a "tuned space" (2013, p. 5). Elsewhere McKinney (2012, p. 16) has argued that in 'immersive scenographic performance there is often an invitation to engage in an open-ended experience of sensing and feeling through imaginative engagement with the material qualities of the environment'. Thus, for the purposes of my own project, materials include lighting, architectural parameters and spectators whose sensory faculties are foregrounded by the event's context and whose intersubjective 'relational' faculties are activated by its contents. For example, in *B of I*, placing one spectator at a precise 45-degree angle to one other spectator 1.8 metres away and performing directly to the two key spectators in turn sets them into a very particular relation with each other. The 'expanded scenography' of the piece sets the two primary audience members into a relation of competition and partial access, of voyeur and victim, as these two are all the while watched by a larger block of 'shadow' audience.

Precise lighting is also crucial. Katherine Graham coins the term 'scenographic light' to describe 'an affective use of light that works to generate meaning independently' (2018, p. 28-29). This more holistic approach to the interweaving of visual elements also invites a consideration of the subtler and more proprioceptive impact of scenography and lighting in particular. She distinguishes 'the scenographic', as referring 'to the underlying principles of spatial and temporal inscription' (p. 43). Meanwhile, Arnold Aronson (2005) suggests that 'postmodern design...requires a perceptual interruption' while also needing 'the unity and cohesion of a frame to encompass it' (p. 26). Following these thoughts, I began thinking through *B of I*'s structure 'scenographically' in order to discover how light, space and rhythm could shift both the piece's dramaturgical structure and my own performance delivery. How can scenography alter the viewing relationship in a one-to-one or small-capacity performance so that it moves beyond its frequent convention or "frame" of close physical proximity to the performer? How can scenography invite a more epic and distanced mode of encounter into the small-scale performance while building in this 'interruption' demanded by Aronson?

My studio experimentation with Marty Langthorne led us to develop, through playful trial and error, a shared lighting language symbiotic with *B of I*'s original parameters. While the piece occurs in three equal cycles, its scenography and lighting design required a more nuanced and cumulative arc. By discussing the piece's thematic concerns of envy, the act of looking, distance and proximity, we decided that a certain amount of distance between microphone and audience (approximately 10m) was necessary to establish boundaries between each of the three lighting 'worlds' we discovered, and that lighting both primary audience members (A and B) was necessary. Following Graham's observation that 'scenographic light is inherently dramaturgical, in that it is concerned with the impact of light on the structure of experience and the influence of light on the construction of the performance event' (p. 55), we chose to explore the ways in which separating the piece into three light worlds' could drive both my own performance (by using the lights as co-performers) and the spectator's understanding of the piece's rhythm and narrative arc .

Christopher Baugh (2013) has discussed the ways in which 20th century design (particularly that of Adolphe Appia and Josef Svoboda) drew attention to the "time-based nature of live performance" (p. 141). Key discoveries for Langthorne and I included the creation of three distinct light 'worlds' and the impact of stretching out the performer's transition between these realms, slowing down both the fade up and the performer's walk towards the light in order to effectively stretch time and operate rhythmically. The first lighting world consists of a series of combinations of blue backlit Fresnels, sidelit turquoise Source 4s and silver spotlight, **[Channels 1-6 in Focus Notes, Item 6]**, which work together to emphasise the distance between performer and audience members (unusual in a small-audience performance encounter) and the epic quality of the performer's demeanour at this position. In the second lighting world **[Channel 7]**, for example, I perform in tandem with the lighting cue, effectively allowing the Source 4's gradual fade to pull me forward while looking directly at it, a move which echoes the piece's lyrics 'men flock around me like moths around a flame'.¹ This creates a different and more complicated sense of the performance's relationship to space. At the end of this lighting state, I look abruptly from the Source 4 to the audience member (either A, B or both depending on which of the three cycles we're in). While the second lighting world's corridor of light has brought me closer to A and B, the performance image up until this point has been effectively distanced by my stare at the light. By breaking this stare and looking at my next 'victim', I break the boundary set up by the lighting state and signal the proximity to come – a move that echoes the "perceptual interruption' highlighted by Aronson. Thinking more scenographically here permitted us to allow the materials (the floor light in particular, its position, and my relationship as a performer to the floor light in space over time) to structure the action dramaturgically.

The next lighting state **[Channels 8 & 9, with the shadow audience backlit through 10 & 11]** emerges only when I move towards A or B and begin to speak. By hooking the cue onto my movement at this point, we effectively orient the piece's scenography around my sense in any given performance of the piece's rhythm – how long to stretch that look to the light and abrupt look to the audience. In this way, scenographic thinking shapes my performance delivery – I work with the floor light and my sense of this previous cue's appropriate duration in order to move distinctly and abruptly into the next cue and position. This type of thinking is rhythmic but also practical - it allows for the improvisatory responsiveness required in small-capacity pieces without compromising the piece's aesthetic delivery. Light encourages the performer to tune into the performance space in a more proprioceptively active way even as it potentially draws the spectator's attention to their own senses through the shift of colour and light over time. According to Graham, 'in determining an audience's access to what may be seen, light is further affecting sensory, proprioceptive, and intellectual engagement with a

¹ This lyric is from "Falling in Love Again," a song made famous by Marlene Dietrich in *der Blaue Engel* (1930); *The Ballad of Isosceles* works intertextually with both that film and *Blue Velvet* (1986).

performance' (p. 157); my experience of rehearsing and then delivering this performance in York is that light (as part of Graham's 'scenographic' thinking) permits a more nuanced performance delivery by tuning the performer into the playing space as a rhythmic machine that operates across time and the venue's given architecture.

Light facilitates a 'visceral shift from one type of viewing to another,' as Graham reminds us (52). Lighting can encourage a more cinematic mode of spectatorship, and certain theatre-makers welcome this cross-pollination between the theatrical form and the language of cinema; Robert Wilson, for example, uses the language of 'zooming in' when describing shifts in his compositions (Holmberg 1996, p. 25). Aronson suggests that all postmodern design invites this type of meta-vision, within it; the spectator is 'constantly made aware of the experience of viewing' and with the present image's 'reverberations' with the past (2005, p. 14). In *B of I*, participants choose whether to be primary or 'shadow' audience members and also make specific choices about where to look; for example, when I come very close to A's physical person in the second cycle and perform as if I am about to spit in his/her face, A can choose to stare me down or look straight ahead, or even 'opt out' by actively recoiling. B, meanwhile, can choose to engage with my invitation of eye contact while I move close to A, or look elsewhere. My hope is that the scenographic framing of these choices (through lighting and performer's proximity, which shifts back and forth from epic distance to closeness) leads the spectator to have a 'denser' affective experience of whichever choice they make – indeed, to be aware of themselves *in the act of choosing*. Lighting's inclusion in performances for small audiences is rare, due to the minuscule resources often allocated to such presumably nomadic and adaptable work. What Langthorne and I have discovered through our studio experimentation, however, is that giving precise attention to a lighting plan's execution can enrich a small-capacity performance beyond measure – particularly one that contains thematic concerns of distance and proximity. Light structures experience dramaturgically (both the performer's and the spectator's) and encourages a more proprioceptive activation from all parties. As Graham reminds us, 'the mediation of light extends far beyond its ability to control what is visible, but is a product of its manipulation of the performance environment through selection, transformation and organisation of space and time' (113).

When I brought the complete lighting design to SLAP in York [**Item 7: Phase Two Documentation (video documentation...)**] I decided not to bring a technician/lighting operator due to the festival providing their own. We ran into some difficulties, however, when the lighting desk wouldn't import the show file for the design, and when we did not have sufficient tech time to properly run through the rhythmic changes between lighting states (despite me providing all information well in advance). Unfortunately, this counteracted the ideal set out by Appia of 'light as a genuine accompaniment, a continuously moving and transforming light "score"' (in Baugh 2013, p. 142). While lighting desks do theoretically permit lighting designers and operators to record and play back set lighting states in order to "play" the entire lighting installation as a giant instrument' as Baugh writes (*ibid.*), this is only possible when the venue grants the production sufficient tech time and working technologies. While the venue operator and I eventually found our own 'rhythm' with regards to mimicking the set lighting design, the obstacles led me to discover that rehearsing and bringing my own lighting technician with me on all shows in the future will be necessary in order for the design to be 'played' as the 'giant instrument' it has become.

In 'Seeing Scenography: scopic regimes and the body of the spectator', McKinney suggests that contemporary work operates within a new "scopic regime" focussed entirely on the spectator's affective capacities: 'the spectator's body is significant as part of the way in which the visual might be understood... as a material and spatial environment within which awareness and understanding can be triggered' (2018, pp. 15-16). This new 'embodied' spectatorship or mode of viewing permits 'material elements such as light, volumetric space, smell and sound [to] take on a particular significance – and McKinney acknowledges that

some pieces might even include competing, and sometimes overlapping, scopic regimes' (pp. 16, 19, 4). *B of I* now works explicitly with a distanced mode of viewing aided by light and spatial choices in the first instance, then complicates this as a 'scopic regime' by collapsing into a liminal (lighting world two) and proximal (lighting world three) mode of viewing experience and back again. How can these types of viewing be transposed into documentation?

PHASE THREE: VR/360 FILM DOCUMENTATION

This final phase of the project sought to explore how a bespoke piece of video documentation using new 360/VR technologies might create an experience for a remote observer that simulates and expands upon the scenographic atmosphere found in Phase Two. The question of how best to document a one-to-one or small-audience performance has been active since the form's proliferation in the early 2000s. In her seminal Live Art Development Agency study guide on the form, Rachel Zerihan admitted that "what I find most exciting about the One to One performance is the opportunity it affords the spectator to immerse themselves in the performance framework set out by the practitioner" (2011, p. 3). But traditional documentation forms – text, static video and photography – seem antithetical to this immersion, flattening its enveloping quality into something static and unyielding. Some scholars have turned to the creative forms of written reflection in order to document the one-to-one's spectatorial experience (see Heddon, Iball & Zerihan 2012). I worked on transposing this lighting design and mode of scenographic thinking into 360/VR video form, in collaboration with Langthorne, filmmaker Adam York Gregory and sound engineer Luke Harrison to the project. The resulting film can be found in **[Item 8: Phase Three Output (The Ballad of Isosceles in VR-360 film)]** – it can be viewed on an VR head-mounted device (HMD) or viewed in 2D form on laptop/tablet devices.

In his introduction to *Documenting Performance: The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*, Toni Sant makes the distinction between performance documents and systematic documentation, saying the latter constitutes a more active process of making the context around a performance accessible in a document and its metadata (2017: pp. 2-3). When done carefully, he argues, documentation can afford artists new insights into their own work and processes and introduce the work and its themes to new audiences, expanding its impact and reach (pp. 5-6). In a later chapter in this collection, Ben Spatz proposes a "dense video documents" as a new term, which "[function] in parallel to live performances in that they too offer composed surfaces through to glimpse the depth and complexity of ongoing practices" (2017, p. 250). New technologies and tools permit new types of transmission, according to Spatz (240-241). Following this logic, I considered how 360-video technology, ambisonic microphones/editing and HMDs might be used to create a "dense video document" version of *The Ballad of Isosceles* when viewed in combination with the other elements available in this portfolio.

Initial studio experimentation with Gregory in April 2019 included researching and testing new technologies including a Vuze+ VR camera, Sennheiser Ambeo 360 microphone, Oculus Rift HMD and Oculus Go HMD. During experimentation, we began to establish a shared vocabulary for shooting and editing the film, which we then shot in June 2019. We discovered a few key techniques, all of which expand on the thematic and affective material detailed in the first two phases of the project above:

- Casting an actor as the other viewer ("B" to the film spectator's "A"), whose position is set in counterpoint to the 360-viewer's throughout. This filmed "B" performer (we nicknamed the character "Bernie") would wear a headset *in the film* in order to suggest his parallel position to the viewer's, and would wear a

blazer identical to the fabric laid out on the camera's chair – so that when the viewer looks down, they see a blazer similar to the one being worn by Bernie and are hence encouraged to identify with him.

- 'Hard cuts' to the film which encourage the viewer to feel as if their spectatorial position has changed, fostering a sense of disorientation by rapidly altering their viewpoint on the performer's action. This effect works with and expands upon the shifts already present in the LX design, adding to a sense of the viewer's relationship to the action changing suddenly – the kind of "perceptual interruption" mentioned by Aronson. As seen in **[Item 9: Phase Three Documentation (Storyboard and Shooting Script)]**, we decided to keep the camera in A's position until the middle of the second "Falling in Love Again" in the piece's second cycle, so that the viewer has the chance to experience being given the performer's full proximity/attention as well as being ignored/used as a prop before their position is destabilized by moving the camera. The VR viewer's POV/the camera is then moved to the 'shadow audience's' position (**see 12:41 in Item 8**) in order to simulate the viewer being placed outside of the action and watching from a distance, before a slightly softer cut (**see 13:00**) takes them back into the inner 'triangle' in the position formerly occupied by "B"/"Bernie", effectively switching places with "B". The camera continues to occupy "B's" position until partway through the third "Falling in Love Again", when it switches very briefly (**see 17:00**) to occupy the performer's position at the mic. During this quick shot, I (as the performer) stand next to the camera's position in order to simulate the feeling of the performer "standing beside" the VR viewer as he/she stands in the position of chanteuse. Finally, the VR viewer is returned to their original position (**see 17:19**) as "A" for the end of the song and the piece's blackout.
- At **14:03**, popcorn-chewing noises in the viewer's left ear trigger his/her attention to look left, where he/she can see the seating bank (empty on arrival) now full of doubled loops of 'Bernies', as well as a few doubled loops of Isosceles/me. This simulates the 'shadow audience' of the live performance appearing where once they were absent, fostering an uncanny sense of being watched without realizing.
- In the second half of the shot in which the viewer's POV is moved to the microphone briefly (**see 17:12**), they can hear the performer singing but her lips do not move. Instead, she holds the microphone up to the camera; this promotes a feeling of otherworldliness as well as a sense of the "weird" (*qua* Fisher 2016).
- Luke Harrison edited the sound and mixed it so that it swirls three-dimensionally during the three renditions of "Falling in Love Again" (**from 6:27-7:51; 11:55-13:17; 16:33-17:57**), encouraging a palpable sense of atmosphere.

The practical findings from the shooting process were that the camera's lighting settings require every moment to be over-lit – otherwise, the camera automatically dials up the visual 'noise' in the image, creating a distorted effect that can't be solved easily even in post-production. Our workflow was also delayed by the camera's temperamental in-phone application and slow rendering time due to large file size. Finally, we also realized that the Sennheiser Ambeo 360 microphone, while an amazing piece of kit, did not work for this particular project due to it being all "all-hearing ear" (to the camera's "all-seeing eye") and picking up undesirable ambient noises from the space. Harrison thus chose to use only the

handheld microphone's feed in post-production mixing, applying spatialization and reverb effects to this retrospectively. Reflecting on the process through interviews with Gregory and Harrison (for transcriptions see [Item 10: Appendix]) has permitted me to reflect on the project's outcomes in terms of the efficacy of both the lighting design/scenographic approach and the film document that followed. This allows research findings to emerge from the natural ebb and flow of collaboration in a studio space, but goes further reflectively than most non-research-based projects permit.

Interviewing Gregory leads me to reflect on what this new camera technology permits in terms of situating the audience member in a certain scenographic environment retrospectively. The term "immersive film" seems to describe our goals most closely. As Gregory states, 360 filming becomes a question of "what" or "who" the camera is:

the vision in normal 2D cinema and film is the director's vision. It's what they want you to see. What we're doing with 360 stuff is who we want them to be....What is their role in positioning and in relation to the performance?...every time we cut, we're moving the person. Or we're stuttering their reality. And I think that that's very different. The human eye's very comfortable with flashing black and coming back again. Blinking, essentially. But with 360, you're not blinking, you're making the entire world disappear (Gregory, 2019)

Harrison also reflects on the ways in which intimacy and immediacy are made possible through sound – though, ironically, through post-production effects applied to a standard handheld mic (as opposed to the 360 mic); I reflect on this more below.

Gregory and I discuss how the medium makes both "weirdness" and "eeriness" now possible (*qua* Mark Fisher's formulation of the "weird" and the "eerie"): "the idea that because the film is 360 that something could be going on behind you while you're looking forward is something that never really occurs in cinematic filmmaking" (ibid.) The weird – defined by Fisher as 'that which does not belong...[which] brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it' (2016, p. 10) – plays out through the overall atmospheric approach, placing a remote viewer in an immersive environment and performing to them in a way that "does not belong" in that space, as well as emphasizing the extremes of proximity and distance already at work in the piece. Meanwhile the "eerie" arises when an uninhabited or emptied environment seems to operate of its own accord, from unseen forces (11). This second affect plays out in the choice to reveal a bank of seated "Bernies" watching the viewer over his/her shoulder. Gregory also suggests that the deep black of the studio theatre location permits the film to take on a surreal and Lynchian quality in which anything unlit becomes voidlike (2019). Harrison adds to this with his post-production choices eliminate ambient noise from the final mix (creating a sonic equivalent of the above void) and to swirl the sound edit in order to make the viewer feel more spatially located and immersed (2019). The film document thus allows the uncanny affects suggested by the live performance's thematic content to expand.

Gregory also comments on how essential it became to structure the shoot ahead of time to minimize the need for unnecessary editing in post-production. This way, we need only edit when trying to achieve a particular effect – in order to establish the eventual viewer's reality – but do not disrupt perceptual stability through constant jump cuts. This leads me to believe that – ironically – creating a 360 immersive film requires the maker to construct the intact live performance event as if for an absent body. Gregory's observations on how Phase Two's LX/scenographic plans shaped his approach to filming and editing indicate the slippery cross-pollination between the live and the digital – how understanding the event's live mechanics shapes can shape its documentation. Harrison echoes this with his account of the sound editing process using Reaper software and DAVR Pro Spatial Connect tools (which allow the editor to wear a headset and edit on a 360-degree basis). By moving both

his head and the two handheld controllers while wearing the Oculus Rift, Harrison was able to wrap the sound edit to my movements, enabling a head-tracking function for the future viewer. This locates the film very firmly against the parameters of the viewer's body – a function impossible in conventional 2D film documentation. Through this editing process, Harrison effectively re-animated and expanded upon the live sound's existing and desired spatial oscillations.

Both collaborators reflected on the potential of this type of “dense video” for engaging viewers and shaping artistic processes. Gregory suggests that the voyeurism inherent in the piece becomes a generous act when documented in this way:

what you're doing is you're allowing someone the agency to be somewhere when they're not, and that's kind of almost like a piece of armour. It's a safety net...there are people for example, like myself, that might not want to sit on a stage with performer (2019).

These experiences permits viewers normally fearful of immersive performance situations – as well as other whose neurodivergent or physical preferences prevent them from experiencing this type of work live – to engage with experiences remotely. Offering the viewer a chance to “try on” an undesirable or challenging emotional state is innately generous art-making, according to Gregory (ibid.).

Harrison and Gregory both reflect on the ways in which the film might shape the piece's live incarnations in the future – by experimenting with spatial sound in a virtual environment, for example (Harrison, 2019) or through the reincarnation of certain filmed elements (the pre-show music, the chairs, “Bernie's” blazer) in the gallery space in which the film is staged (Gregory, 2019). As Gregory says, we make a “portal” that helps to facilitate “an external immersion factor for an internal one. It's a way of just easing people into one world and making it believable” (ibid.). Harrison also reflects on the ways in which editing in a virtual environment – through perceptual jump cuts or ‘swirling’ sound – might become a fertile testing ground for future makers with regards to testing scenographic/design effects in space. This might lead the work towards future phases of experimentation in the live staging of 360/VR performance documentation.

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