



Building
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performing body, performing space

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There are many examples of spaces designed for rituals, ceremonies and social gatherings, and developments in the design of such spaces have reflected social, cultural and historical change ; but what of performance space ? Theatre design has evolved in tandem with the theatrical traditions and demands of the society each tradition serves, but a number of basic elements have remained a relevant—a performance space accommodates the performers and the spectators or audience members in a particular configuration that reflects the nature of the performance itself, and the nature of the relationship between them. Indoor and outdoor performance spaces take into account, to a greater or lesser degree, the demands of sound projection, acoustics and sightlines. There is an interrelationship between the nature of the space and the nature of the performance piece ; in some cases the space can be reconfigured in response to the demands or innovations of the theatre piece, in other cases the architecture of the space dictates or defines the performance piece during the development and rehearsal process.

What is the relationship between a performing body and the space it occupies ? This question applies to designed performance space, and to spaces that are appropriated or adapted for performance. In this article I do not consider theatre design but how we perceive the body, and how our perceptions of the body affect how we read performance and architecture. Performance meets architecture in our perceptions of the body. Two less typical examples are :

- the use of public outdoor space as performance space where the architecture, designed for a different purpose, becomes

inherent to the performance.

- the reading of architectural models, where performance facilitates architecture as, effectively, we corporealize the space in our imagined inhabitation of it.

In the first example an outdoor performance becomes 'site-specific' and the architecture, and often the function of the site in question, become part of the creative process. A performance piece can be inspired by the choice of site, its location, plan and/or the potential audience members that use the space as part of their daily routine. Buskers perform in busy streets or outside public buildings to maximize their audiences. Their work, as musicians, jugglers, etc., can be altered to accommodate the specifics of the spaces chosen. Outdoor performance is subject to weather conditions, so outdoor spaces that provide shelter as part of their original function or design become unlikely performance spaces. In 1999 and 2000 I directed first year students of the School of Drama, Trinity College, Dublin, in on-campus outdoor performances. In one particular instance a group devised a piece around a particular building's function, and performed the opening of the piece in white lab coats, at the entrance to the Biotechnology building, thereby blurring the distinction between themselves as performers and science students as passers-by and spectators.

One significant aspect of outdoor, and indeed indoor, performance in a public open space in that all passers-by are audience members, however fleetingly and unwittingly ; and issues of public order are relevant in a way that they

are not in a contained, designated performance space. Also, any performance in a public space is just that—a performance. With the potential presence of audience members as inhabitants of public space all on-site rehearsals and run-throughs are performances in themselves.

In the case of architectural models, perceptions of the body allow us to 'perform' the models as buildings. A model's three-dimensional quality is theatrical, and we perform the building's function and design accordingly. I recognize that this example is based on a simplification of the concept of the model, and that there are many and varied interpretations of the model as a design tool. However, the model requires an imaginative miniaturization of the self, and the performance of a given building's function in the imagination.

The key issue in both examples is the perception of the body, which raises a number of questions. Are there culturally specific responses to the design and the interpretation of performance space? Are there culturally specific perceptions of the body? In the Irish context for example, is there an Irish body? In 'The Erotics of Irishness' Cheryl Herr speculates on what she describes as Ireland's 'over-identity crisis' and questions the perceptions of the body in Irish society:

One feature that almost no one mentions is the relationship between the Irish mind and any kind of Irish Body. The identity-obsession marks a social repression of the body on a grand scale. As I see it, the loss occurs on both individual and collective levels. (Herr, Cheryl, 'Erotics of Irishness', *Critical Inquiry*, University of Chicago, 1990 : 6)

Although Herr is primarily concerned with visual art and

archaeology she refers specifically to the material presence of the body and how it has been represented :

Ireland has literally eroded, in the sphere of representations that constitute social identity, a comfortable sense of the body ; in tradition as well as in colonial and post-colonial Ireland, the body has frequently been associated representationally with danger and has been scrutinized with an intensity that stills (photographically) (Herr 1990 : 6).

Here the problematic notion of the 'Irish Body' is introduced. How, as audience members and/or practitioners, do we read the body in performance and in relation to the other bodies in the space? And does a repression of the body on individual and collective levels give rise to a specific theatre tradition—are we defined by a repression of ourselves? The late twentieth-century performance of Irish plays and the work of Irish actors for an Irish audience brought the word, the body, and the image together in a shared space and before an audience which was not culturally homogenous, but had the shadow of a striving for a homogenous society in its recent history. This was reflected in the legislation of the new Irish Free State, which embraced a restrictive Catholic ethos as an agent of enshrining tradition. The civilizing of the body was undertaken by the newly postcolonial, as the young nation worked to recreate itself in the same image and likeness of the coloniser—in the image of its maker.

In performance there are a number of bodies taking part in the process, from actors, designers, directors and playwrights to the body of the audience, the space, and the body politic within which the whole process takes place. Ultimately, it is embodied selves



The entrance to Parson's Building : one of the Trinity college campus sites animated through performance by first year BA students on 11 May 2000 ; photograph by Bernadette Sweeney.

that are responsible for the representation of themselves and others, therefore, some representations of the body become privileged, or 'more authentic' than others. So, how do we place the body within the performance of authenticity? Performance, as a construct, problematizes the notion of authenticity in that the body's (bodies') movement is for the most part predetermined in the rehearsal process, and yet we hold on to a, maybe nostalgic, belief in corporeal expression. In so far as the body is staged it becomes the 'final' essential 'truth'. Thus, we reverse but conversely extend the typical privileging process by championing the veracity of the body over the word in the performance moment.

If our faith in the body implies an essentialism of the body, what exactly does that suggest? If the body is capable of authentic or 'true' gestures, does it then follow that the more 'physical' a performance is the more 'true' it is? And is there then a universal truth, or is each body's authenticity dependent on its cultural specificity? To perform the body in the Irish context is to do so within a specific set of cultural conditions. But these conditions are in a constant state of flux and therefore to essentialize the Irish context is as dangerous as to essentialize the performing body within that context.

To suggest, as Herr does, that there is an Irish body is to ignore continuing conditions of change—the rapid rate at which Irish society has developed throughout the twentieth century especially. Also globalisation and mediatization are not accommodated by the essentialism of the 'Irish body'. Economic and political circumstances, education, gender, and sexuality; these and other considerations shape our

projections of and on the body within Irish culture and beyond. So while there is not an 'Irish body' on, or off, the Irish stage, the body performs within a culturally specific set of conditions that are subject to change.

We experience, observe, and perform the body as both subject and object. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological studies have situated the body within experience, and our perceptions of it. As the body is both subject and object, we relate to our surroundings through our material presence but can visualize our bodies moving through those surroundings, thus objectifying ourselves. The duality of self as subject and object (but never 'other') is heightened for the performer. The placement of the body on stage or in the performance space relative to other 'objects', both animate and inanimate, emphasizes the body as object. In theatre the body as subject becomes more complex, especially when a performer is working with a character or characters; the self as subject is still in place but the body is also projecting an-other. Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes the significance of experiences through which the body exists and perceives: 'in so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which it draws my body' (Merleau-Ponty in Welton, Donn, (ed.), *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1999: 156). This can be taken to dismantle an opposition of mind and body that does not accommodate the body as one of the architects of performance. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology informs

performance by implicating the actor and the experience of performance in the creation of meaning. The audience is implicated here in that the physical experience of the actor is not that of each audience member ; by evoking physical senses (and emotional states) the experience of performance can be recognised as other and yet evince visceral responses in the onlookers.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body transcends specificity : 'To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding and of all those inter-sensory correspondences, which lie beyond the segment of the world which we are actually perceiving' (Merleau-Ponty in Welton 1999 : 174). If we perceive space experientially rather than conceptually it can then be said that we design space through our projected or imagined physical experience of it. Thus, architecture is visceral. The body performs architecture, and is the architect of performance.

[Bernadette Sweeney](#) is a performer, director and lecturer.

This piece is based on material from the doctoral thesis 'Wooden, Wounded, Defaced—Performing the Body in Irish Theatre 1983-1993' by Bernadette Sweeney.

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