

# **The nature of communication between scenography and its audiences**

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# Abstract

This practice-based study uses a series of three scenographic performances to investigate the nature of communication between scenography and audience. Structured using iterative cycles of action and reflection, the trajectory of the three performances begins by drawing on recognisably mainstream professional practice (*The General's Daughter*), through a scenographic experiment aimed specifically at enfolding the audience (*Homesick*) to engaging and involving the audience through scenography and creating a new form of performance (*Forest Floor*).

Although the potential impact of scenography has long been recognised in professional theatre practice, this is the first piece of practice-based research which examines the particular contribution of the scenographic and the way it works on its audiences. Scenography is inseparable from the performance event yet its particular material qualities draw on languages of the stage that appear to speak simultaneously with, but separately from, the textual and the gestural. This investigation focuses on the visual, spatial and somatosensory dimensions of scenography and on ways of capturing and theorising the experience of viewing scenography.

The study shows that audience members register scenography as a multi-sensory experience. The polysemous nature of scenography allows it to become a site for imaginative projections, where audiences draw on their own feelings, experiences and their creativity leading to unique responses within the collective experience of a scenographically-crafted performance environment. I propose that scenography works as an agent of exchange, provoking intersections of imagination where individuals can reflect on and playfully explore propositions of what it means to be in the world. This leads to the instigation of a new form of scenographic performance and an expanded view of the creative implication of audiences.

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# Introduction

The aim of this research project is to investigate the nature of the communication between scenography and its audiences.

Within that aim, the specific objectives are:

- To use performance to investigate models of scenographic practice which expose different modes of audience engagement
- To develop methods of gathering audience response to scenography
- To establish a framework of theories and concepts which enable the development and elaboration of practical scenographic work
- To bring scenographic practice into dialogue with theories to offer new conceptual models for scenography.

This written commentary sets out the methodological and analytical frames and brings the practice into dialogue with theoretical perspectives which have competency towards the aims and objectives above. Transcriptions of audience comments appear in Times New Roman font to distinguish them from the commentary and quotations from other authors. It is recommended that you read the commentary before viewing the DVD.

The DVD contains an introduction to viewing the practical work in the light of the key points arising from the analysis and full-length video recordings of each of the three performances that were developed in the course of this research.

The raw data of audience responses is included on a separate CD.

# Research Context

In the UK and internationally, the gradual adoption of the term scenography (as opposed to décor, set design or theatre design) has coincided with the emergence of research in design in theatre and performance.

Until recently, publications in the scholarly field were, in the main, representations of dominant professional practice. Illustrated surveys of trends in theatre and set design (for example, Davis, 2001; Goodwin, 1989; Aronson, 1985) and retrospectives of widely acclaimed designers, such as Jocelyn Herbert (1997) and Ralph Koltai (1997) and Josef Svoboda (1993) are typical of this first approach. These works celebrate the diverse approaches to theatre design (mainly concentrating on the set) and on the craft and individual working practices of particular designers, in a mainstream professional context where set design can be seen as successful in its own terms but 'marginal' to the whole performance (Davis, 2001: 10). Exceptionally, Denis Bablet's comprehensive account of European stage design in the twentieth century (1977) considered milestones of theatre design in terms of the wider context of art movements and their influences. But, in general, these works do not seek to analyse or theorise the practice.

However, interest in defining a more integrated practice of 'scenography' has now taken hold. Although not a new term in itself, it has served to focus a reappraisal of the role of design in relation to the expressive and communicative possibilities of the visual and spatial material on stage and its interaction with the text and the performers. Jarka Burian's analysis of Josef Svoboda's work (1971) was one of the first attempts to examine practice in terms of key principles and concepts and offer a model for scenographic thinking. The formation, in 1994, of the International Federation Theatre Research working group for scenography, helped to support the emergence of scenographic

theory and Pamela Howard (2002) used her own practice to consider the role of design as scenography. Her account of scenographic practice is more ambitious and far-reaching than conventional expectations for professional theatre design. It is centred on the 'dynamic role design plays upon the stage, orchestrating the visual and sensory environment of the performance' (Howard, 2002: xv). Scenographic aspects are central to both the compositional and production processes of performance and also to the audience experience.

The scenographer visually liberates the text and the story behind it, by creating a world in which the eye sees what the ears do not hear. Resonances of the text are visualised through fragments and memories that reverberate in the spectator's subconscious, suggesting rather than illustrating the words (Howard, 2002: 33)

The assertion is that scenography extends and enriches the experience of performance through images which operate in conjunction with, but in a different way from, other aspects of the stage.

This perspective is helpful in reviewing radical and experimental practice from the past to identify issues and concepts from which scenographic theory is now emerging. Christopher Baugh has re-examined Bertolt Brecht's use of stage design and revealed, in particular, Caspar Neher's use of scenography as an active agent in the construction of meaning (Baugh, 1994).

More recently, he has brought together the work of pioneers in the use of stage design and technology, such as Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, and Josef Svoboda, in order to establish key points and concepts in the development of scenographic thinking and practice in the twentieth century (Baugh, 2005). As Baugh shows, this work is a rejection of the illusionistic, pictorial stage and investigates, instead, concepts of scenography as architecture for performance, the scene as a machine and the extent to which scenography itself might be considered to perform.



Meanwhile Arnold Aronson has drawn on past and contemporary work to analyse the physical and 'the spatiovisual aspect' of the performance event in order to restore it to its 'proper place' as an element integral to performance (Aronson, 2005: 6).

Over the last decade developments in practice-based research methods in performance have been gaining ground and are now beginning to make a new and distinctive contribution to scenographic research.

Recent practice-based research into performance and technology (Brejek, 2006; Palmer and Popat, 2006), the relationship between space and performance (Hannah, 2007) and site-specific performance as a site for collaboration and new forms of spectatorship (Irwin, 2006) suggests that we are witnessing a new phase in scenographic theory. New perspectives on the potential for scenography to open up the 'processual, emerging and transformative character' of the mediated stage (Brejek, 2006: 165) or for the potential of the 'embodied nature of live performance' to shape 'spatial materiality' and the idea of a 'performance landscape' (Hannah, 2007: 136) show that practice-based work inevitably defines scenography in relation to performance and brings new insights to both fields. Indeed, practice-based research in scenography, particularly that which moves away from traditional theatre buildings, is beginning to define new relationships between performance and audience. Palmer and Popat draw on Paul Crowther's concept of the 'sensuous manifold' (Crowther 1993) to model the oscillation between transparency and reflectivity generated by their interactive, kinetic light installations (Palmer and Popat, 2006) while Dorita Hannah has used architectural interventions to bring groups of performers and audience together in one labyrinthine space in a 'dystopian experiment' out of which emerged 'moments of great beauty, insight and communality' (Hannah, 2007: 143).

It is against this shifting and emergent background that this research has been conducted. The particular context of this practice-based investigation into the nature of the communication between scenography and its audiences is that very little in the immediate field of scenography comments directly on the topic. Although Stephen Di Benedetto has written on the expressive capability's of Robert Wilson's scenography (2000) and has theorised the role of the audience as 'attendants' in contemporary live art and performance (2007) this has been through observation, not practice.

The communicative potential of scenography has, to a limited extent, been considered within some theoretical frames from the wider field of theatre and performance studies. Specific consideration of scenography as a signifying system has been developed through semiotic analysis (notably in Pavis, 2003; Ubersfeld, 1999; Fischer-Lichte, 1992; Aston and Savona, 1991). In general, semiotic approaches have been helpful in identifying component parts of the contribution that scenography makes to the experience of a performance. In particular, Patrice Pavis has developed an approach which is flexible enough to consider the materiality of performance as part of the signification and is therefore, particularly suited to analysis of the scenographic and Anne Ubersfeld has made important reference to the 'ludic object' (Ubersfeld, 1999: 124), indicating that scenography has an active and performative role.

Gay McAuley's investigation (1999) into the meaning-making potential of space has opened up new avenues of enquiry which move analysis away from the linguistic models which tend to dominate semiotic analysis. Her study includes consideration of the expressiveness of theatrical objects, but her focus is on the agency of the performer as animator of the object and not on the object as scenography.

Phenomenological approaches to the perception of the theatre event have been mainly focused on theorising the relationship between the performer and the audience (Garner, 1994), although Bert O. States

takes a more holistic view of the stage and incorporates consideration of the scenic as a 'field of space and shape' in which meanings 'parasitically swarm' (1985: 27).

Studies of theatre reception have acknowledged the contribution of the audience in interpreting the theatre event but have made less explicit reference to scenography (Sauter, 2000; Bennett, 1997). Susan Bennett concentrates on theories of reading theatre adapted from literary theory to address active modes of viewing and the 'emancipation' of the spectator (Bennett, 1997: 213). Willmar Sauter's hermeneutic of theatre reception identifies three levels of operation; sensory, artistic and symbolic (Sauter, 2000: 6-7), which leave room for scenography but which do not address it explicitly.

During the course of this project, I have also looked at more distant contexts in order to develop a theoretical frame which is pertinent to scenography and the development of my practice.

In the first place, theories pertaining to art and the still image have been identified. As well as his writing on semiotics, Roland Barthes' examination of the nature of the photographic image distinguishes between different levels of meaning and engagement (Barthes, 2000 and 1977). In conjunction with this, Johnathan Crary's study of attention, that identifies the ways in which visual material activates modes of reception, has provided a broader cultural perspective (Crary, 2001). Paul Crowther's account of the nature of making and viewing art prompts consideration of scenography as a mutually enhancing exchange between rational and sensuous material (Crowther, 1993). Crowther's claim that viewing and making sense of art is a fulfilment of our need for self-consciousness has led to Jaques Lacan and Julia Kristeva who both address psychological perspectives of the function of art.



Lacan's theory of the gaze has been influential on theories of spectatorship in film studies via Laura Mulvey (1975). However, where Mulvey concentrates on Lacan's evocation of the male gaze and the implication this has for a gender-inscribed viewing of cinema, I have, instead, considered the idea of the screen as 'a locus of mediation' (Lacan 1977: 107) and how it can be applied to scenography. Kristeva meanwhile provides a valuable corrective to the tendency of semiotic theory to focus on correlations between signification and language (Kristeva, 1986). Her formulation of the 'semiotic chora' offers a model for the rich, non-verbal clustering of signs that scenography might produce.

Crowther's insistence on the concrete particularity of artworks and their appeal to embodied understanding has links to phenomenology. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of phenomenology (1961), multi-dimensional and multi-sensory aspects of perception lend themselves to consideration of scenography and I have also drawn upon Michael Polanyi (1967) and Antonio Damasio (2000) to investigate the embodied nature of understanding from philosophical and from neuro-physiological perspectives.

Finally, concepts of space have been investigated. Henri Lefebvre's theories of the production of space (1991), Edward Soja's notion of Thirdspace (2000 and 1996) and Gaston Bachelard's 'poetics of space' (1994) can be pointed more specifically towards scenography by considering Luigi Prestinzenza Puglisi's concept of projection (1999), which he borrows from art practice and applies to architecture. These theories of space have been influential in considering scenographic communication as a constructive, active and spatial way of thinking.

# Research questions

My specific questions in relation to the overall project, an investigation of the nature of communication between scenography and its audiences, are:

- 1. What aspects of scenographic images do audiences engage with and respond to?**
- 2. What different kinds of sense do audience members make of scenographic images and what levels of significance are attributed to them?**
- 3. In what ways are the scenographer's original intentions and references apprehended by audiences?**
- 4. How subjective is the appreciation of scenographic imagery?**
- 5. How far can audiences be seen as co-creators of scenographic images?**

Although I acknowledge the interactive nature of scenography in relation to other elements of the stage and within the performance event as a whole, I have attempted to focus on the particular characteristics and qualities of scenographic images and the kinds of responses they evoke. The term 'audiences' is used to reflect the different ways in which spectators might be involved in the experience of scenography. Although the term refers to hearing rather than seeing, it is the term which seems to be most capable of holding within it a variety of possible modes of engagement. At given points in the commentary, it becomes more accurate to talk in terms of viewing or spectating, but these terms also carry with them connotations of passivity and distance. 'Audience' is a more neutral term and 'audiences' has helped me maintain consideration of individual as well as collective experience alongside the different experiences of scenography which my work has presented.

# Methodology

Here I will discuss the key methodological principles that have been adopted, show how these were developed through successive cycles of action and reflection and summarise the advantages and the problems of the methodology.

## Methodological principles

The methodological principles for the research were:

### 1. to use performance

Scenography happens over a given period of time at a pace dictated, in the main, by its creators. Although audience members have the freedom to select the aspects of the performance that they will give their attention to at any given moment, and can, in limited ways, influence the performance of the actors, their choices occur within the framework of the production as it is conceived. This then also provides the reference points for their subsequent responses. It is not merely individual images which occur as part of a performance that audiences respond to, but the accumulation of imagery over the duration of the performance and the interaction of scenography with the other performance elements. Currently, much of the analysis of scenography, historical and contemporary, relies on the visual images which remain after a performance is over such as photographs from the production and designer's models and sketches. But this tends to isolate the scenography from the holistic experience of the performance.

### 2. to use my own practice

I have professional experience as a designer of set and costume in mainstream theatre. In this project, I have worked principally with set, costume, objects and light. Although sound takes on some significance (particularly in the opening of *Homesick*), and sound is now recognised as part of the palette of scenographic materials



(Theatre and Performance Research Association, 2006), I have concentrated on visual materials as this is my area of expertise. My own insights, experience and knowledge as a designer are at the core of the performances I have created. It has therefore been possible to investigate audience responses in the context of my own intentions and anticipations. However, an important part of the evaluation of audience response was to look for responses which are beyond, or contrary to, those which I had in mind as I created the work. The impact of the scenographic image relies both on the potential of the images as created by the scenographer, and the extent to which spectators pursue active modes of viewing. The formulation of the imagery needed to leave room for the imaginative contribution of the audience. I could not predict with any certainty how audience members would respond or react to these images. But drawing on my experience as a practitioner, I sought to establish particular territories and frameworks of material, themes and motifs. I also reflected my own creative process and attempted to externalise the intuitive and tacit knowledge that I have acquired. Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge suggests that 'we know more than we can tell' (Polanyi, 1967:16) and we are unconsciously aware of things before we can consciously attend to them. Donald Schön says practitioners habitually move between modes of tacit knowledge and reflection-in-action but reflection-on-action brings a more conscious and cognitive understanding (Schön, 1983). A key motivation for this project was to bring tacit understanding into dialogue with theoretical concepts in order to articulate and propose models for the operation of scenography.

### **3. to gather and analyse audience responses**

There are no existing methods for eliciting audience response to scenographic performance. Publicly available analysis of scenography consists almost always of the written account of a single spectator's view. Sometimes this is the result of several viewings and is influenced by other information, such as interviews

with the scenographer or knowledge of their previous work. It is therefore rarely the immediate response that we see, but a synthesised and considered interpretation. There have been attempts to record audience response in general. Vsevolod Meyerhold developed a system of notation which recorded audience behaviour in response to a performance (Bennett, 1997: 6). This was intended to reveal the audience's automatic and, presumably, unconscious response, but dealt with the audience as a homogenous group and yielded nothing in the way of individual response. More recently, Pavis has developed a questionnaire, aimed at recovering and reconstituting the entire *mise-en-scène*, as a tool for the 'spectator-analyst' (2003: 31). Whilst including reference to scenography, I judged this approach too general for my purposes; it aims at recording a detailed impression of the whole performance. I had, instead, to develop suitable methods for gathering and analysing audience responses which take account of the particular nature of the scenographic imagery. I needed to gather responses as close to the point of performance as possible, interfering with or distorting the process of spectating as little as possible.

My audiences were made up of theatre practitioners, design practitioners and theatre scholars and students. I anticipated that these people would be responsive to the experimental nature of the work and the tasks I set them and that they would be able to provide the detailed and articulate responses I needed.

#### **4. to develop the methodology through three successive cycles of performance and analysis**

The work was planned in three cycles, enabling me to develop and refine the methodological approach over the course of the project. I drew on action research methods (McNiff *et al.* 1996) and the idea of iterative practice which incorporates critical reflection. Through

cycles of doing and reflecting a 'spiral' of knowledge is developed where research questions underpin the 'disorderly creative process' and give structure and focus (Trimingham, 2002: 55 - 56, Popat and Palmer, 2005). Each cycle of work consisted of the preparation and presentation of a performance, the gathering and analysis of audience response to the performance and reflection and development of methods towards the next cycle. In each cycle, I identified theoretical models which would be useful in helping me shed new light on the research questions and in moving the practice and the project forward.

## **Cycle 1: *The General's Daughter***

The aim for the first of my research performances *The General's Daughter* was to test the tacit knowledge I have acquired as a design practitioner and bring it into a more explicit frame of concepts about the way scenographic imagery can communicate.

Accordingly, I devised a performance, which although led by scenography rather than a theatrical text, nonetheless drew on mainstream theatre practice, inviting the audience to look in on sequences of performed actions at a distance. Alongside this, I used widely accepted theories of scenographic communication (Kennedy, 2001; Fischer-Lichte, 1992; Aston and Savona, 1991) where the image as stage picture is foregrounded and semiotic perspectives are prioritised in order to frame and analyse the work. A few, notably Bert O. States (1985), have argued for a more phenomenological approach, but I decided to test the usefulness of semiotics as it has been applied in the theatre and in photography and film in this first cycle.

Scenographic images can function in different ways; as narrative (through metonymic images), as atmosphere, as metaphor or as symbol (Kennedy, 2001; Aston and Savona, 1991). In addition, Roland Barthes' examination of film and photography provided a means to

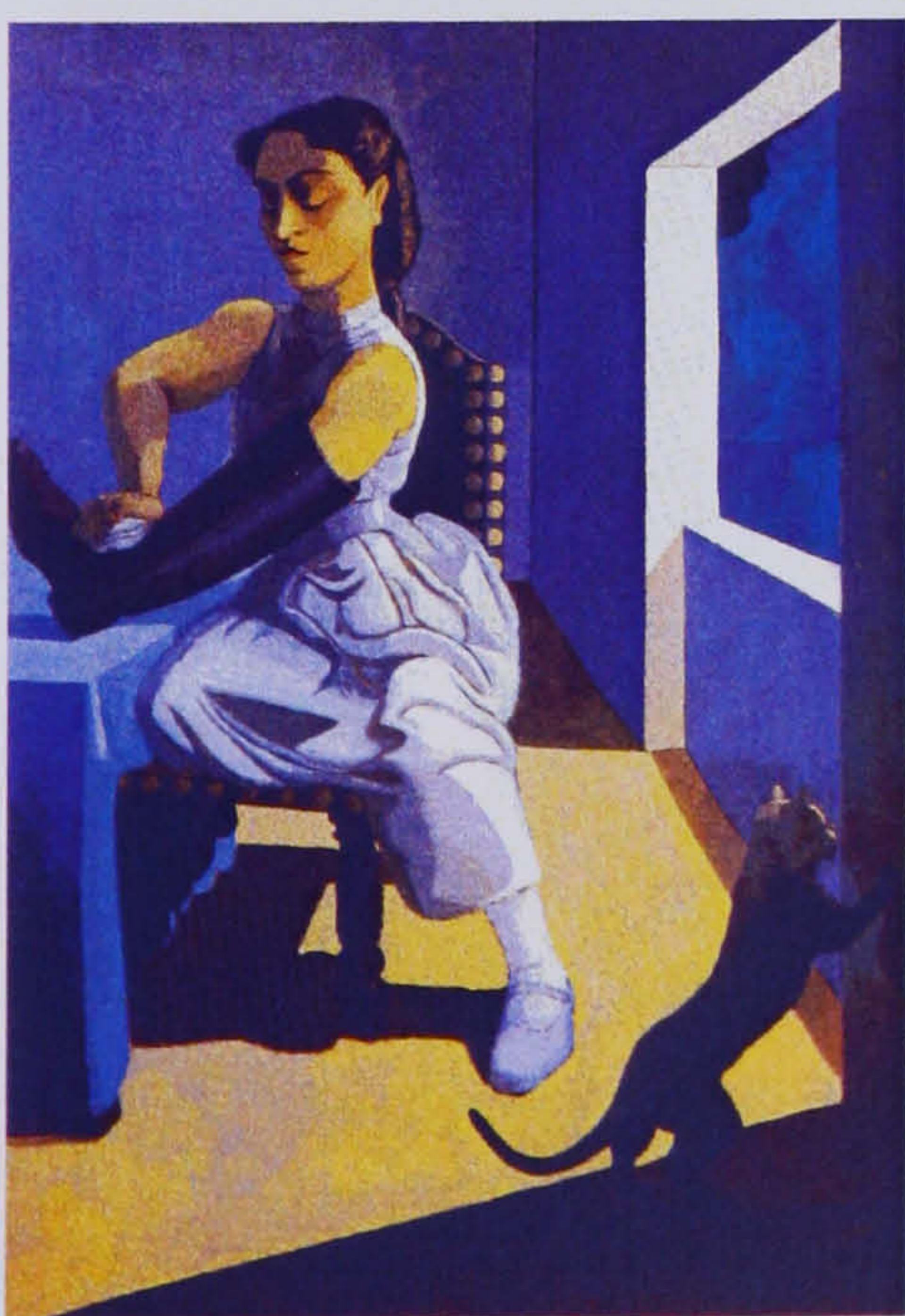


conceptualise how levels of operation or significance might be extended for individual viewers. Images are polysemous and imply a 'floating chain' of signifieds from which the 'reader' is able to either choose or ignore (Barthes, 1977: 39). Images can be seen to be weaker, less precise than language. But their polysemiotic qualities allow more possible meanings. Visual elements appear to be less stable in terms of signification than words, but this opens up the ways in which images may be experienced and interpreted. Barthes' notion of 'studium' and 'punctum' distinguishes between a polite interest in and attention to an image (studium) and a more immediate and more idiosyncratic response (punctum). The concept of punctum as 'that accident which pricks me' highlights the visceral and disruptive potential of an image (Barthes, 2000: 27) and further develops the idea of unstable but potent imagery.

I sought a specific context and narrative as a frame for a scenography-centred performance and *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Euripides offered the possibility of operating on several levels at once. The immediate situation of the story (the relationship between Iphigenia and her parents, especially her father, interested me in particular) the universal aspects of the drama (sexual and political power) and more contemporary resonances (the impact and aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Centre and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq) together offered fertile territory to explore through scenography. Trying to visualise the character of Euripides' Iphigenia, I considered Paula Rego's painting of *The Policeman's Daughter* (McEwen, 1992: 169). It seemed to offer an interesting parallel of a father-daughter relationship which is shaped around ideas of power and duty. The girl in the painting is dressed in white and is polishing her father's heavy, black leather boots. She is absorbed by the task, her arm pushed almost up to her armpit into the boot. My reading of the image led me to consider the possible nature of the relationship between the painted girl and her implied father and to what extent she might be a model for a more contemporary Iphigenia. There are various contrasts suggested by the



composition; black and white; strong light and shadow; the perpendicular lines of the room and the sinuous curves of a cat in the foreground; the girl's white skirt, crumpled like an unmade bed and the starched, stiff linen of the table cloth. They seem to point towards the way the girl asserts herself in relation to her father. She appears to carrying out a menial task, yet she is dressed entirely in white. The expression on her face is determined but it is hard to read her thoughts. She has secrets and desires. Sitting in her father's heavy studded chair and polishing his boots, she feels herself to be powerful and capable of infiltrating the adult, male world. But she is safe and secure in a high room. In another of Rego's paintings, *The Fitting* (McEwen, 1992: 187) a girl is having a final fitting of a ball gown of the kind that a 1950s debutante might have worn. The expectations of her role as an adult woman are mirrored in the construction and nature of the dress with its tight bodice and voluminous floor-length skirt. But the dress is also a 'chrysalis' (McEwen, 1992: 188) which enable her to emerge, butterfly-like. The Girl's mother and a seamstress are complicit in the moulding and grooming of the girl for her new role. These two became merged in the governess character that features in *The General's Daughter* (see the pages from my sketchbook, p. 46) and the idea of the dress as a transformation was central to the final wedding/sacrifice scene.



left: *The Policeman's Daughter* (1987) Paula Rego



right: *The General's Daughter*, photo: Craig Lomas



I also wanted to leave room for the contribution of the audience and the possibility of moving beyond the obvious meanings. The basic narrative thread derived from *Iphigenia at Aulis* was explored and overlaid with references and resonances beyond the immediate situation. A limited range of colours, objects and materials; black, white and red, boots, chairs, a white wall with a window, sand, planks, white silk were used repeatedly but in different ways so that their significance could change, over time, through the accumulation, juxtaposition and transformation of images and through repetition of motifs offering both grounding and transcendence. Certain images were selected to upset or disrupt the flow of images, for example, the image of a man falling from the World Trade Center. Meanwhile, the pace of the performance was slow and deliberate, giving the audience time to absorb detail and to open up space for leaps of imagination in the minds of the viewers.



*The General's Daughter*

photos: Craig Lomas

Immediately after the performance, the participants (30 in total) were asked to record their immediate and individual impressions in writing. First they were asked: 'What did you see, feel and think during the



performance?’ Next they were asked to discuss in groups of three or four the following questions: What did you see? What were your immediate responses to what you saw? Did you draw on those responses? And to what effect? What happened to you and to your responses as the performance progressed? What did you experience?

The structure of these tasks was designed around claims about the way spectators move from the immediate experience of a performance to being able to reflect on it and describe their experience (States, 1985; Pavis, 2003) The first task was intended to capture immediate individual response with little time for respondents to process the experience cognitively. The second task took into account how the exchange of responses with other members of the audience can be part of the process by which we become conscious of, or evaluate, our responses to a performance. By talking with others we continue the ‘interpretive process and...enhance the experience of that production in the individual’s memory’ (Bennett, 1997: 164).

This first phase of my research established a more objective and detailed foundation from which to build further practice-based investigation. The data from *The General’s Daughter* tended to reinforce my professional and tacit understanding. My instincts regarding how and what images would communicate were largely confirmed by the responses, but the analysis of the responses provided me with an emerging framework of theoretical perspectives and further refinement of the line of enquiry. This was valuable in helping me adopt a more integrated role as a scenographer-researcher and it provided a further focus for the next cycle of research. Reading audience members’ comments and listening back to the recordings of discussions, I found my intentions for the piece conveyed back to me through 30 different voices with many different inflections. Many comments were close to the way I had described scenes and images to myself and to the production team as we rehearsed. Although no-one named Iphigenia, many respondents picked up on the overall direction

and theme, for example one notes 'images of power, dominance and freedom' and another 'contrasts of control and violence'. What surprised me, though, were comments that made me think again about the content and impact of my work. I had not expected the references to very personal insights, for example a memory of 'standing on a chair, presumably having my trousers pinned up for sewing' was evoked for one of the spectators. This provoked a consideration of the extent to which the material I had presented in *The General's Daughter* might have been shaped by my own memories and feelings, for example towards my own father or presentations of women and not only by professional judgements of the craft of scenography. Images and ideas which might be recognised and shared by a community are inflected with individual experience and constructions of the self. I realised that my work as a scenographer could not be simply to transmit ideas, no matter how poetic and subtle. The negotiation of shared images and images which contribute to our sense of self has to operate dialogically as a communication; a process of moving towards agreement. In the next cycle I determined to develop a performance which was more obviously open to interpretation from the audience and a site for exchange rather than transmission.

*The General's Daughter* produced a range of valuable responses and further insights into the nature of scenographic communication, particularly with regard to the first four research questions (p. 8), but they also pointed towards new objectives which needed to be addressed in the next phase.

The semiotic framing of *The General's Daughter* was largely self-fulfilling, in that it yielded a wealth of incisive and detailed analysis of the signs of the scenography as they were perceived. This was informed by the focus of the performance itself and the nature of the post-performance tasks which may have suggested a particular mode of analysis to my participants. An air of distance or detachment comes across in many responses. As theatre and performance scholars and practitioners the audience represented an 'interpretive community'



(Fish, 1980: 171) who will tend to have a particular and common approach to reading (or in this case viewing) and who may be overly self-conscious in their responses. But there was also a small but significant strand of responses that adopted alternative strategies for viewing. These were informed less by a search for meaning and more by their immediate responses to the formal and physical dimensions of the scenography; colour and texture were used by some as a principle means of viewing whilst others referred in detail to the deferred sensation of weight and movement generated by the materials. Also, in contrast to the cooler responses, a few stood out as distinctly subjective and uniquely inflected by personal insight or experience. However, the means of gathering audience response did not feel conducive to these more embodied responses.

I had attempted, with only partial success, to restrict the impact of the human performers in relation to the more obvious scenographic aspects; the costumes, the objects, the light and the space. This meant the performance tended towards a series of tableaux and underplayed the potential of performers' bodies, gestures and movements as part of the scenographic experience.

## **Cycle 2: *Homesick***

The aims for this performance were to investigate the spatial and somatosensory dimensions of scenographic performance in order to instigate a wider range of responses and to explore alternative means of gathering response.

Drawing on theories of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and space (Bachelard, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991), I created an immersive environment to foreground the spatial dimension of scenography, integrate the performers and the audience more dynamically with the scenography and encourage a range of sensory and more direct



responses in order to better address the phenomenological and embodied aspects of scenographic reception (Garner, 1994; States, 1985).

The silk which I had used in *The General's Daughter* re-appeared in *Homesick* as I wanted to test its potency in another context. In *The General's Daughter* the silk largely worked to effect a transformation, enshrouding and obliterating the girl's body. In *Homesick*, the material qualities of the silk and the possibility of it registering haptically were prioritised over intellectual impact and its potential as a signifier.

I didn't work with a theatrical text as I wanted to give as much emphasis as possible to the scenographic materials and their composition. There were some literary influences, in particular *Laura Blundy* by Julie Myerson (2000) and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987), but these were used to think about how particular spaces and objects can evoke intense and moving responses. The spoken phrases at the beginning of *Homesick* draw on the novels and on my memories and those of the cast and they were intended to evoke the mysterious power of places and objects and their place in our memories. Thereafter, the combinations of performers' bodies and pieces of furniture, cloth, skirts and puppets provided a collage of images of childhood, family and growing up. The scenographic elements were selected more for their inherent material and structural qualities than their potential to operate as iconic referents. The swaying movement of the skirts, for example, was more important to me than the idea that they might suggest a particular period. I paid particular attention to the construction of the puppets, which were specially developed for this performance. It was important that their movements were awkward and strained in the scene where the two male performers use them to depict a parody of a family. The contrast between the fluid concentration of the operators and the stilted approximations of the intimate gestures of the puppets helped create an ambiguity which was both comic and unnerving. Meanwhile, I ensured that loose joints would allow limbs to dangle and

settle in ways which simultaneously draw attention to the puppets as constructed objects and allow a possibility that they are not entirely inanimate.

In *The General's Daughter* it became apparent that the realisation of scenography implies human agency. Two of the audience saw the operator of the confetti drop and wondered about the significance of the 'man in the sky'. This accident pushed me to explore a mode of performance where the nature of scenography as a construction would be emphasised. In *Homesick* the calico room had no roof so the lighting rig could be seen. When a wind machine disturbs the fall of the calico walls, it exposed the theatre space and the white-costumed technicians working in it. This was intended to establish a more active role for the audience, both through their physical implication in the work to heighten awareness of themselves as audience and through the anti-illusionistic mode of performance which consciously exposed the technicians working in the space beyond.

The means of gathering responses was developed to take account of the distinctive features of responses to scenography as opposed to responses to performance in general. Through preparatory workshops, I developed the use of image-making as a means of investigating responses informed by phenomenological experience and embodied understanding of space, composition, colour and movement. Joy Schaverien discusses the way image making has been used in psychotherapy as a means of therapists coming to understand the archetypal dimension of a patient's life. The particular value of this approach is that making art provides a means of escaping 'the censor of the conscious mind' (1999:31). In art therapy, image making is followed up by the patient being encouraged to talk about their image so that the image becomes a tool towards communication rather than an end in itself (Malchiodi, 1998; Ross, 1997). These preparatory workshops revealed that, despite some initial reluctance, participants enjoyed the process of image making and of talking about their work



afterwards and that they were much more disposed towards identifying their subjective feelings and private memories than was the case with *The General's Daughter*.



corridor 1



empty room



shadows



sweeping paper + dolls



puppet baby



puppet murder



skirt dance



laundry



waiting

From *Homesick* storyboard

Joslin McKinney

The audience became part of the scenography and, implicitly, part of the action of the performance. The audience (approximately 10 for each of the four performances) were led through a narrow calico tunnel to a small room constructed of calico walls. There was clearly a larger space beyond, which could be glimpsed when the calico was disturbed. The performers appeared first outside the room as large shadows, surrounding and disorientating the audience making them conscious of



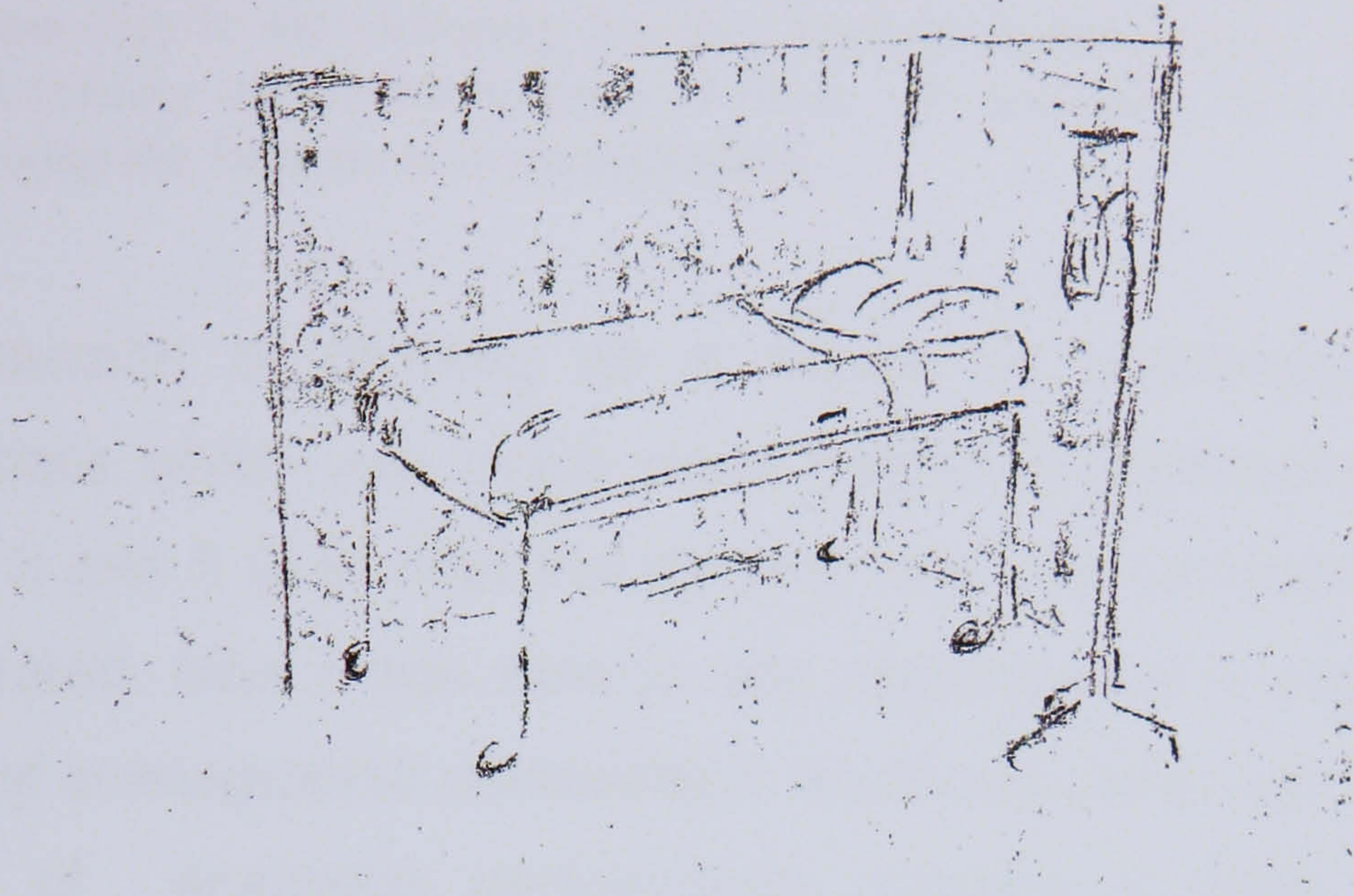
their own physical presence in the scenography. The scenography evoked several locations at once; a dust-sheeted room empty except for a period wardrobe, a Victorian nursery (with hand-made dolls and puppets) and an institution (with identical hooped skirts). This was reinforced by the restricted range of colours; unbleached calico and the faded cream-coloured furniture. Drawing on Bachelard's notion of spaces in houses that can open up 'the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth' (Bachelard, 1994: 6), the logic of the scenography in *Homesick* moved between spaces; a hand; then a drawer, a wardrobe, a room and then what lies beyond the room; an imagined house, a theatre space, a world beyond. The performers appeared to be children trapped in a room, acting out rituals and fantasies of adult life. Their actions were determined by the physical space, particularly when they use the wardrobe as a puppet booth and again when they dressed in hooped skirts and performed a slow swaying ghost of a dance. They moved through and around the audience encouraging the audience to move themselves in order to see.

Again, there was an invited audience including theatre academics and practitioners but this time I invited more students of theatre and performance. The drawing workshops showed that students were likely to be generous and perhaps less guarded than professionals in their responses. Where *The General's Daughter* was a carefully controlled spectacle, *Homesick* was instead an enfolding environment which audience and performers shared.

Although I will analyse the responses from all the performances in the Analysis section, I will briefly outline the value and outcome of this image-making task here, as it has bearing on the subsequent development of the methodology.



For some, the process of drawing was carefully thought through and distilled several ideas through producing another seemingly unconnected image:



I drew ...a hospital bed with a curtain round it...basically because I had a sense of enclosure and also a sense of vacancy. So the hospital bed is empty, so there's nobody in it but yes there's something waiting there. There's the drip waiting there for someone to occupy this place which is...I suppose hospital beds in one sense are restful but they're also uncomfortable because you're ill, dying or whatever or just being born, any of those kind of things but yet you can't do anything beyond the nature of your reason for being in there ... it took a little bit of thought to sort of crystallise the way I felt and that kind of summed it up in a way.

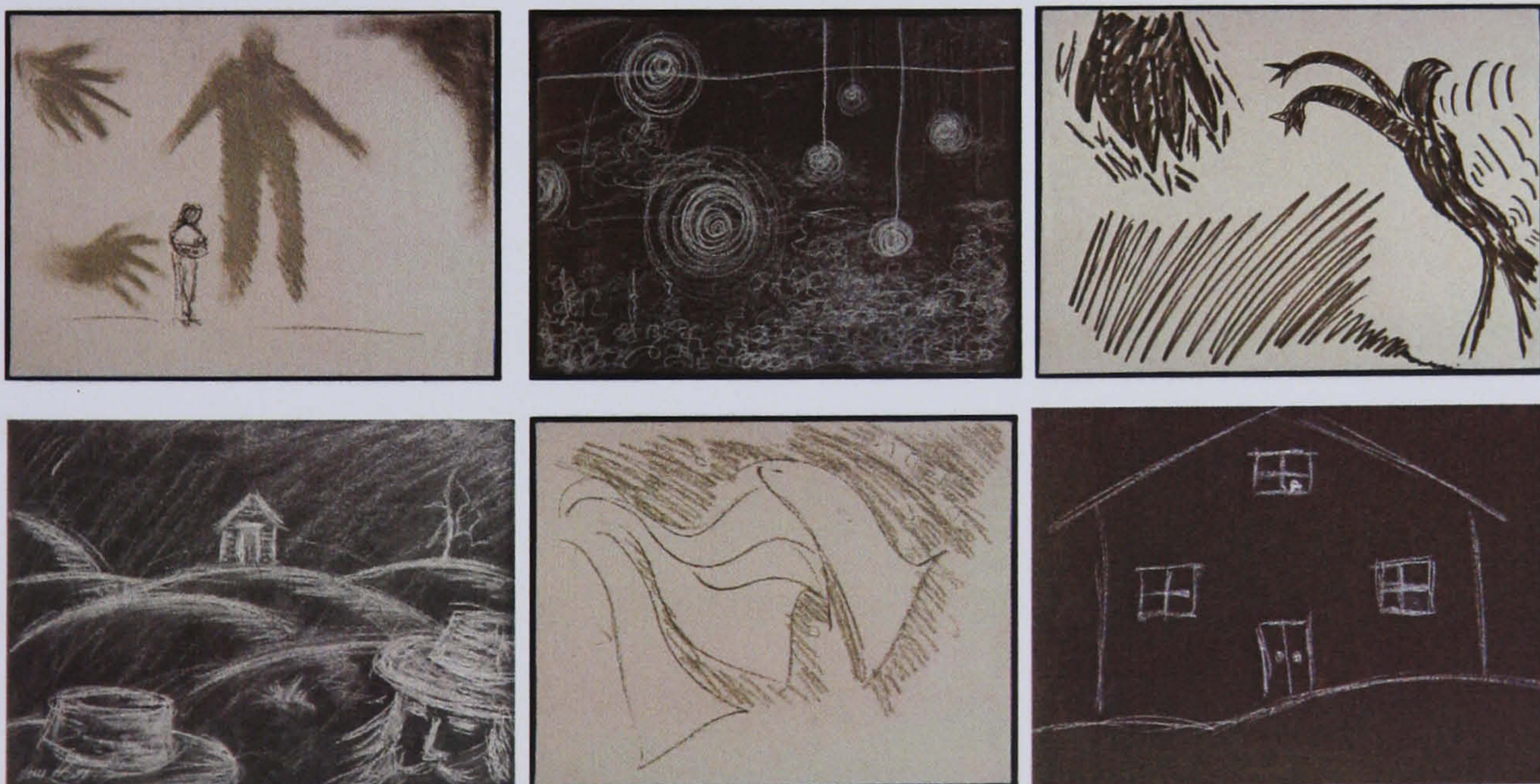
But often people used image-making to process the experience of viewing in a more immediate way:





... I think first of all I started with the skirts, and then I realised that I hadn't got any bodies inside them. So I was only taken with the shape of the skirts and their design and not the personality of the individual at all. And then of course you can see the hands coming through there. So I was obviously quite affected by the shadows of the hands, and particularly the tension in the hands...And suddenly my picture turned into these swinging lanterns, I mean I know they're not swinging, but they become lanterns now. So that there's light coming out of the bottoms of them. So somehow, now the hands are swinging the lanterns in my imagination.

The introduction of drawing as a means of registering response provided data which was much more helpful in addressing research questions 3 and 5 (p.8) than the material that *The General's Daughter* had generated. Now I was able to see responses in a medium more reflective of scenographic composition. As Pavis points out, drawing as a means of analysing performance conveys a more immediate response as it can retain 'a gestural and kinesic quality' (2003: 33). The explanations that participants gave for their drawings provided insight into the way *Homesick* had worked on them at a phenomenological level. But the drawings themselves also carried significance.



Audience images from *Homesick*

In art therapy, practitioners are wary of interpreting drawings as a means of diagnosis, insisting on the patient's expertise in interpreting their own work and concentrating instead on the talk that making drawings enables (Malchiodi, 1998: 48). In the context of my research, however, it was as if the participants' own scenographic imaginations



had been set to work. Their drawings extended my original scenography by projecting and transforming the performance into significant images of their own. What was distinctive here was that I was now able to see responses to my scenography in something approaching a scenographic form. The collective vibrancy of the images, overlapping with and extending my own work, revealed something of the phenomenological encounter that scenography might be said to offer. And studying the images, for themselves as well as in consideration of what their creator had offered in explanation, felt like a conversation or exchange, through images, about the material and themes of *Homesick*. The notion of the 'scenographic exchange' became a key concept in attempting to model the complex relationship between the scenographer and audience members through the medium of performance.

### **Cycle 3: *Forest Floor***

The principal aim here was to test the notion of scenographic exchange through and in performance. I aimed to create a performance event where the roles of audience, performers and designers might merge and switch and to observe manifestations of scenographic exchange. In this way, the audience responses were intended to be folded into and become part of the performance.

Based on the on-going analysis of the earlier performances, I developed a taxonomy of scenography based on the following interacting levels of operation; the grammar of scenographic exchange:

**Scenographic material** – this refers to the nature and the qualities of objects and materials in performance, the sensuous, aesthetic and hermeneutic qualities of textures, colours and forms and compositional relationships between objects. This material frames the performance and engages the attention, inviting absorption in, and /or interpretation of, the visual aspects.

**Scenographic construction** – refers to the spatial aspects of scenography, the way scenographic material is registered in the body and phenomenologically and equally to the notion of spatial thinking or projection as a way of reflecting on or constructing meaning

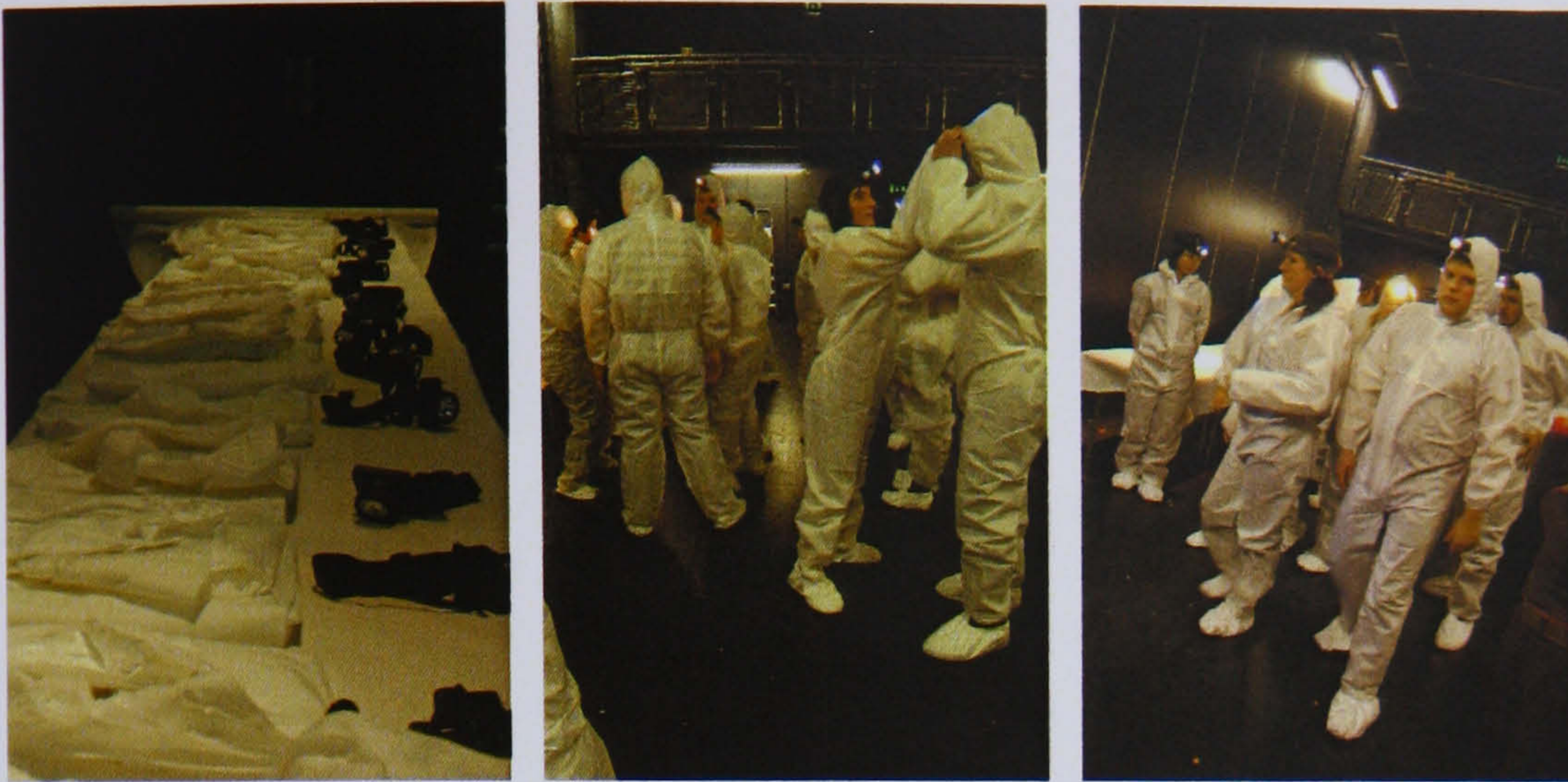
**Scenographic action** – occurs when scenographic material and processes of scenographic construction act to stimulate in viewers experiences of iteration, intervention, transformation or disruption between the scenography and other aspects (particularly the performers). This notion of action centres on the way the scenography works on its audience, the significant and particular contribution it makes to the experience of performance. It may occur in some measure for the audience as a whole or it may occur at the level of an individual spectator.

In *Forest Floor* I created a scenographic material which was flexible enough to offer multiple scenographic constructions with the intention that this could lead to scenographic action either for individuals or collectively. The attempted blurring of roles was a means of displacing conventionally-bounded roles in order to set up conditions for concrete manifestations of scenographic exchange.

Before the performance, the audience members (approximately 12 at each of the five performances) were dressed in white protective overalls and given head-torches before they entered the performance space which is dimly-lit and is demarcated by suspended silk tubes which suggested a birch tree forest and a row of objects; a wooden chair, men's black brogue shoes, a fur coat, a net underskirt, a top hat and a dozen little bean-bag dolls. Two performers, also in white overalls, presented stylised versions of fairy-tales (Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard and Hansel and Gretel) using just movement and gesture. Three designers, dressed in the same overalls, performed the role of kurogo



or proscenium servants (see Braun, 1995: 106. The significance of this will be addressed later).



*Forest Floor* audience

photos: Neil McPhail

When the performers repeated their sequence for a second time, the designers introduced objects and costumes to embellish and give context and meaning to the movement; Red Riding Hood's granny was given a chair to rock in, the wolf a big red-lined fur coat, Bluebeard's wife was dressed in a white net skirt and long white gloves for her wedding and the bean-bag dolls became the previous wives. The designers also chalked on the floor; pine tree forests and sweets and cakes for Hansel and Gretel, wolf footprints and words of warning. They sprinkled snow, and threw confetti at Bluebeard's wedding. Their head-torches were spotlights, tracing and highlighting the focus of their attention.



*Forest Floor* rehearsal

photos: Neil McPhail





*Forest Floor* dress rehearsal

photos: Neil McPhail

Gradually their interventions became less rehearsed, adjusting and altering the course of the performed action by the imaginative and intuitive use of objects. Granny became granddad or the wolf merged with Bluebeard. Designers themselves performed some of the movement so that sequences were seen to double or to disintegrate and create hybrid stories or reversals of the originals. Performers had to respond to these developments in the moment, drawing on their repertoire of movement motifs and creating alternative lines of action in response to scenographic proposals and interventions. In preparation for *Forest Floor*, I had discussed with the performers and the designers the potential potency of fairy-tales and the ideas of Bruno Bettelheim (1976) and ways in which they might be inflected and subverted, as for example in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. (Carter, 1981). The intention to establish a fertile, open-ended environment is reflected in this comment from a participant:

What intrigued me was that I didn't keep track of the changes of roles that were happening and the combinations of the masculine and feminine



principles there and they kept swapping. And it actually just sort of dissolved into a field of difference which was, again, rhyming with the whole aesthetic.

Performers and designers were seen to exchange the initiative in influencing the course of the action through a dialogue between scenography and performers' bodies. And gradually the audience were enfolded into this process so that they too could contribute to the emerging scenographic construction(s) and generate scenographic action, whether through joining in, intervening, challenging and changing the scenographic action or simply through their immersion in the space and their witnessing, accentuated by their head-torches which trace the interest and focus of the participants.

In both materials and key images, the scenography of *Forest Floor* echoes the two earlier performances. I used silk again because of its potential to be moved and manipulated in different ways. The silk tubes which marked the back of the playing space rippled and undulated when they were touched and the length of cloth glowed in the low lighting. The puppet babies from *Homesick* were also re-used, although this time, there were more. During *Homesick* it became clear that audiences were drawn to them and wanted to pick them up and play with them, but weren't within the convention of the performance, given explicit permission. That, together with their potential to appear both homely and uncanny, made them a valuable addition to the materials that participants might want to engage with as part of a participatory performance. They were a scenographic bridge between the other materials and objects we were using and human participants. Often they appeared to act as small-scale surrogates; projections of the human audience and performers. Also, each of the performances featured an image of dressing up. In *Forest Floor* I used a large stiff white net underskirt. It effectively changed the silhouette (not easy over voluminous overalls) of whoever was wearing it so that they became an archetypal bride. Whereas the elegant bride in *The General's Daughter* was almost blotted out by her costume, multiple brides in *Forest Floor*

were liberated and created by the deliberate dissolving of gender difference that the combination of overalls and net skirt allowed. During the making of *Forest Floor*, in late 2006, the sickening news, from Ipswich, of the horrific murders of six women emerged. This, for me, sharpened the themes of sex and death which we were already working with. The white overalls we were using now suggested the protective overalls worn by investigators at the scene of a crime. The idea of unearthing fragments, and of trying to piece together remnants of stories of abandonment, violence and sexual terror became a recurrent theme for me which helped shape the final 'dance' which ended the performance.

The sound in *Forest Floor* was a specially commissioned piece which used a collage of sounds (knives, footsteps, breathing, chalking and a flute) to create a 45 minute soundscape. In *The General's Daughter* sound (the sea, an explosion) and samples of music (Björk and the Brodsky Quartet) coloured the performance in a way that I felt might have unconsciously manipulated and influenced the audience's narrative reading of the visual material. In *Homesick* I used sound more for texture (breathing, whispering, and drones), rhythm (Phillip Glass) and location (birdsong) which I felt brought the sound material into better balance with the other scenographic elements. *Forest Floor* rehearsals (conducted with audiences in November 2006) had used a loop of insect sounds to create a kind of white noise. This was effective in setting a single sound tone as background; numbing the need for speech and inducing the sense of a ritual. However, I found that the performers needed a mechanism to help them keep track of the overall shape of the piece. Therefore the final soundscape was structured so that the performers could keep a sense of the time and be guided especially through the last 30 or so minutes of the piece when the audience were most active. Cues in the sound helped them work together towards the beginning of each sequence and identify when they needed to pull the focus back for the final few minutes of the performance. But the sound also added a layer of atmosphere and



potential meaning to the piece. The rasping, percussive sounds built gradually in speed and intensity which added momentum.

The audience response in this performance was mainly registered through my own observations of their participation in each performance and supplemented by studying video recordings. After each performance I asked the audience as a group to talk about the experience, their impulses and reflections on contributions they had made or witnessed. I also used the observations of the designers and performers I was working with.

## **Reflections on the methodology**

The decision to target an experienced and articulate audience was useful in obtaining participants who were open to less traditional performance events and who were willing to participate in ways that I required. A potential weakness of my method is that my audiences were part of an interpretive community who came with pre-formed strategies for viewing performance (Bennett, 1997: 40), and who share similar 'horizons of expectation' which allow them to contextualise their particular experience of my performances with reference to wider experience of performance and, more generally, their social experience (Bennett, 1997: 50). However, I needed to weigh this concern against the need for articulate and detailed responses. My audiences were able to supply this level of response because they were generally accepting of experimental forms and because they have, through familiarity with talking about performance, access to vocabulary and concepts which have been useful to apply to scenography. I have tried to guard against attracting a narrow range of audience, too familiar with the work and its concerns; *Homesick* attracted a number of student participants alongside academics and theatre practitioners and arts professionals who had not seen *The General's Daughter*, and *Forest Floor* was performed twice at the University of Hull to audiences experienced in



viewing performance but who had no previous experience of my other work.

The different methods of gathering response; writing, talking, drawing and participating/ performing scenography, have provided a valuable range of data. No single method on its own has been comprehensive; each method yields different kinds of evidence. The nature of the 'evidence' being presented here is potentially open to question. Given the nature of the work and the reception processes at work, outcomes (audience responses) cannot be exclusively attributed to causes (the scenographic performance). The audience responses are themselves open to interpretation. I cannot establish a truly objective position outside the material because the responses are to work that I have created. I have needed to employ a model of analysis which acknowledges my part in the process. The audience is responding to work I have created and their responses prompt me to reappraise my work. What I see in the responses is coloured by my relationship to the performance. Models of action research (McNiff *et al.* 1996) which place the practitioner/researcher within the cycles of 'planning, acting, observing, reflecting and planning' (McNiff *et al.* 1996:22-23) have been helpful here in helping me achieve a productive relationship between making work and analysing the outcomes. The responses from my audiences have sometimes suggested further potential avenues of enquiry that I have not been able to pursue within the scope of this project, for example, the action of images over time (the way images remain and/or consolidate long after the event itself) and the role of sound, in particular, the relationship between what is seen and what is heard. These areas would both be worthy of consideration in future projects.

My purpose in attempting to examine the unmediated experience of scenography was to see what modes of thinking and what senses are drawn on but it is problematic to ascertain how people respond to scenographic images as they are performed. Even when I used visual



and constructive means to capture response, verbal accounts of the experience seemed to be important in clarifying and verifying my observations. The original experience will be modified by the recalling and recounting of it. And experiences which arise from images, in particular, may be inadequately described in words. There are, according to David Silverman, 'no "pure" data'. Even open-ended tasks will not lead to data concerning inner experiences and the 'phenomenon always escapes' (1993: 208-209). In any case, the experience of performance is such that any immediate experience is modified over the course of the performance. Members of an audience recall and revise their responses to earlier images as subsequent images reinforce, extend or question those responses. And this process continues after the performance has finished. There is then, no clear line between the experience of the performance and the subsequent describing and analysing of it. My respondents were able to report how they remembered responding at various points during the performance and how those responses changed through the performance and shortly after it. In all the performances this was valuable to me. The evidence of audience members' drawings (in *Homesick*) and interventions (in *The General's Daughter*) operates in relation to what the participants have to say, but can be read independently, from a scenographic perspective. Here I am interpreting images and interventions coloured by my own impulses and interests.

Successive cycles of working and reflecting provided a flexible design for the study focusing on qualitative material discovered through practice worked effectively to progressively deepen the enquiry. It led me away from the mainstream practice that I have experience of as a practitioner and towards more experimental forms of scenography. Freeing myself from the need to make work which operates within recognisable norms of professional practice helped me address the nature of scenographic communication in an active and innovative way. Estelle Barrett uses Richard Dawkins' account of evolution to argue how combining practice with reflection on that practice leads to



developments in arts practice. Evolution occurs through ‘the differential survival of replicating entities’, and in the same way evolving practices develop both through building on what has gone before and through innovating. The ‘exegesis’, the reflection on or analysis of practice, provides a ‘differential replication’ of the practice leading to potential innovations. These mutations ‘generate alternative models of understanding’ (Barrett and Bolt, 2007: 162).

A process of replication and mutation can be traced through the three cycles of my work. *The General's Daughter* replicated scenographic practice that is familiar, but the reflections that it provoked allowed a mutation towards the next cycle and towards more innovative work. Whilst practitioner knowledge, theoretical knowledge and critical reflection might each produce new knowledge, allowing these three approaches to inform each other offers a dynamic model of practice-as-research which develops new knowledge through the ‘interplay of perspectives’ (Nelson, 2006: 115). At the outset of the research I had some difficulty reconciling the roles of scenographer and researcher. I found myself having to switch between one mode and the other. Gradually, though, these modes intertwined so that one orientation promoted questions and reflections on the other in a more integrated and productive way.

*The General's Daughter* started from what was familiar, that is, a working process that worked from a theatrical text and developed through habitual methods; analysing the text, looking for themes and resonances with a wider network of images, registering my own feelings and intuitive responses through reading and using sketches, models and rehearsals to explore and test ideas. I became more consciously aware of the way that scenography is a process of thinking which oscillates between the visual, the haptic and the cognitive.

Some of the image-gathering in the early stages of the development of *The General's Daughter* was to help locate a visual vocabulary for the



performance. The process of gathering and selecting images was a way of processing my response to Euripides' text and establishing an emerging framework for the performance. Key images, particularly Rego's paintings and documentary photographs of the Gulf War, offered suggestions for the design and performance of *The General's Daughter* in several ways; materials and objects, spatial arrangements, costume, representation of characters and their relationships as well as implied narrative and thematic resonances. For example, the white wall of my design was developed from the simple white rooms and houses which Rego depicts. It had the function of being able to act as a literal screen for projected video, but also a metaphorical screen between the girl and the rest of the world, especially the war to which she will be sacrificed. White-stockinged feet (suggested by the painting, *The Policeman's Daughter*) picking their way deliberately through the sand were for me redolent of her innocence and her privilege. Whilst the image of sand pouring from an empty soldier's boot was a development of a photograph from the Gulf War which carried with it images of burial, cremation and expendable humanity. But these images were rarely lifted complete from their source. They needed to be developed further through drawings, models and rehearsals to ensure that they worked dramaturgically and scenographically. The window in *The General's Daughter* is similar in style to the one in Rego's painting, *The Policeman's Daughter*, but in my scenography the size and position of it was altered so that it appeared just big enough for someone to climb through but out of easy reach. It also had the suggestion of the sun or a blank face; it regarded the scene but could not be looked through. The moment when the Iphigenia character stood with her back to the audience looking up at the window suggested her curiosity about the world beyond and also the controlling authority figure of her father. I used a shift in the balance of light between the room and the light from the window to reinforce this idea.



However, not all the scenography emerged through such coherent processes. In the development of each of the performances I was alert to accidents and coincidences which could be productively incorporated into the work. The final image of *The General's Daughter* was intended as a parallel for the waste and destruction of the Trojan wars, the beginning of which is marked by Iphigenia's willing sacrifice. And as with *Forest Floor*, events outside the rehearsal room gave new focus and significance. Shortly before the second anniversary of the destruction of the World Trade Centre and the performance of *The General's Daughter*, photographs showing people jumping from the towers were published and discussed in the British press. Seeing the images in the context of making the performance provided a moment of punctum for me and I altered the planned ending to incorporate these images. The isolated human figure falling from the tower had resonances with Iphigenia's situation and also with the destruction of innocent lives that follows her sacrifice. I identified the Iphigenia character both with the falling man and with the forces which destroyed the towers. I considered that the juxtaposition of the images of the wedding/sacrifice and the slides could provoke a revisioning of the earlier scenes in *The General's Daughter* and create productive, if uncomfortable, resonances with more contemporary political concerns. The way in which this came about was almost accidental and I resolved to develop a working process that could leave room for accidents or to allow 'unconscious desires to filter into the working methods' (Pavis, 2003: 247). Later, in the technical rehearsal, I noticed the projected figure, was by chance, registering so that it appeared to be caught on the corner of the window. It was important to make sure that this happened in the performance. This seemed to me to resonate with the ideas of suspension, rescue and escape that I felt momentarily arrested the inevitable descent and allowed the possibility of looking at these infamous images, in the light of the rest of the performance, anew.



With each performance I became more open to working in ways which encouraged intuitive and chance discoveries. *Homesick* was developed with the production team in the studio working with objects and materials from the start. The storyboard images were developed towards the end of the rehearsal period so that I could evaluate the material we had generated and develop and refine it for in the final stages. I resisted an overly cognitive approach to the evaluation, prioritising aesthetic concerns over narrative and an embodied and visceral sense of whether an image or a transition 'worked' over a cognitive analysis. *Forest Floor* was developed only through workshops, rehearsals with audiences and the performances themselves. Over time, I became more aware of my own embodied and immediate reactions and I became more attuned to my body registering of the timing of a lighting fade, the impact of fabric moving, or the giddy feeling created by a shift in space and scale. These understandings are important to a scenographer's sensibility. Much of the understanding derived from the somatosensory is embodied and pre-conscious, but it might be noted, nonetheless. Light fading to black on stage can evoke feelings in the pit of one's stomach whilst the throwing of confetti or the swish of a skirt induces other muscular responses. The most favourable conditions for my own creativity were mainly those in the rehearsal room where conditions of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) could be established. Csikszentmihalyi describes how the optimal experience of sustained involvement in creative activity is where an 'almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focussed state of consciousness' is achieved (1996: 110). Being in the rehearsal room with performers and objects helped maintain sensitivity towards the impact of the spatial and the haptic and the way these activate embodied understanding. Within this environment, I would find myself moving between two different modes of thinking akin to Deleuze and Guattari's rhetorical spaces; the 'smooth' and the 'striated' (1987). The smooth space of working intuitively, drawing on all my sense, open to chance developments was balanced with a striated mode where



conscious reflection on the work allowed some distance and opportunity to assess the potential of the work.

One of the most significant shifts that can be traced over the course of the three performances is the way focus pulls back and fragments. In *The General's Daughter*, control over the stage picture was achieved through the placement of the audience in raked seating facing the masked performance area and also through the careful planning and orchestration of the images that appear. *Homesick* played with varying points of focus by placing the audience in the centre and shifting their attention through 360 degrees and from large, enveloping images (shadows on the calico walls) to small objects (puppet babies in the wardrobe). The audience needed to move their bodies and constantly re-direct their gaze. In *Forest Floor* the focus gradually became determined by individual participants. As the audience began to take the initiative multiple and synchronic points of focus occurred for individuals and small groups. These provided intense and intimate exchanges of images. These have not been fully captured on the video, but are apparent in the transcriptions of the post-performance discussions. This might appear to represent a gradual ceding of responsibility from the scenographer to the spectator and a shift on my part from the creation of scenography to the creation of a theatrical experience, but it has also allowed me to test the spectrum of scenographic communication; from something very controlled and striated to an open-ended, smooth although, at times, chaotic experience, from an objective, intellectual experience of viewing to a immersive encounter which prioritises embodied understanding. I have moved in the course of this project towards forms of what Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) calls post-dramatic theatre, but I have done so with a scenographic sensibility. Lehmann examines scenography within the notion of 'visual dramaturgy' which, freed from a text, can 'develop its own logic' (Lehmann, 2206: 93) but he focuses, as do others (notably Garner, 1994), on perception of the scenographic as a visual experience and the ways in which 'complex visuality' can be compared



to a poem (Lehmann, 2006: 94). My work has sought to move beyond the thinking of the scenographic image purely as an optical experience in considering the way objects, environments and costumes inflect performing bodies and become, themselves materials that perform.

I have pursued the potential and the limits of scenographic exchange both as a concept and as a concrete manifestation and these have helped me to think through the implications of scenography as a vehicle for self-expression on the part of the scenographer and as a medium of communal exchange. The challenge for any scenographer, whether working in literary or post-dramatic forms of theatre is to produce meaning which works at individual and social level, to stimulate, provoke and excite spectators and allow them to participate through the activation of their own imagination and their capacity to experience the world through images. I have come to recognise the validity of Pierre Gaudibert's comment on the artistic creator and their relationship as an individual to the rest of society where he says that:

In the work of art is inscribed an energetic charge, which arises from the creator's engagement; it is connected to their personal history, in the face of the society in which they are immersed and of their collective unconscious. (quoted in Pavis 2003: 313)

Alan Read emphasises the connection between the performers and the audience and I think a scenographer, or at least the scenography they produce, can be taken to be a performer in this sense. Read considers 'theatre to be a process of building between performers and their constituencies which employs the medium of images to convey feeling and meaning' (1993: 5). According to Read, theatre needs to be constituted in relation to everyday life, as this is the common currency of both performers and audiences. Scenographers draw on their own experience of the world, their observations, memories and feelings, to 'transmit and transform' the material and the objects of the everyday and release their poetic potential (Read, 1993: 147). Whilst making *The General's Daughter*, I struggled to establish clear lines between my role



as a scenographer, creating work and my role as a researcher, investigating audience response. I came to see that there is a necessary fluidity between these roles. First of all it was impossible not to interpret audience response in the light of my own intentions and feelings about the work. The analysis that follows, therefore, is based on a subjective assessment of qualitative, subjective accounts. However, the raw data is provided in an appendix in order that what I have selected to discuss can be seen to be representative of trends in the responses in general. Secondly, I realised that access to detailed responses to my work inevitably fed back into the next piece, developing my work and my ethos as an artist. Comments on *The General's Daughter* gave me the confidence to make work which is more open to interpretation and explores the intersection between scenography and performing bodies. The experience of *Homesick* helped me recognise the value of scenographic work which has the potential to connect with the spectators as individuals. *Forest Floor* allowed me to explore participatory scenography where the control and precision that governs what we normally associate with good work is loosened so that new images might emerge spontaneously, either at an individual level or collectively, from the scenographic material. Finally, I came to see that asking questions of the way spectators approached scenography was inevitably connected with the way my own view of as a scenographic artist was developing. My interest in investigating the psychological and philosophical dimensions of the audience experience is influenced by the growing recognition that these are aspects that are important in my work.



# Analysis

Following *Forest Floor*, responses from all three performances were reviewed again using the structure of the taxonomy above. The categories of scenographic material, scenographic construction and scenographic action can be mapped onto the focal concerns of each of the cycles of my research, that is; the signifying image (*The General's Daughter*), the sensory and spatial dimension of scenography (*Homesick*) and the notion of scenographic action and exchange (*Forest Floor*). However with retrospective analysis, it can be seen that data from all the performances do, in fact, offer perspectives on all three of the levels of operation that I have developed. The theoretical models which were identified as the methodology developed are here revisited in order to show how my work supplies an iterative supplement to the theory as well as modifying or extending understanding of scenographic practice in general.

## Scenographic Material

### The visual field

Whilst acknowledging (to differing degrees) the impact of all the aspects of the stage, most theories and models of theatre reception and analysis inevitably stress the connection between the human performer and the audience in processes of reception (Pavis, 2003; Sauter, 2000; Ubersfeld, 1999; Bennett, 1997). Stanton B. Garner distinguishes between scenic space, 'given as spectacle to be processed and consumed by the perceiving eye, objectified as field of vision for a spectator who aspires to the detachment inherent in the perceptual act' and environmental space, which is 'subjectified' by the physical actors (1994: 3-4). These two fields of perception are 'rival', he claims, and looking at a scene is like looking at a painting or a sculpture until the



actors appear (1994: 46). Stephen Di Benedetto's analysis of Robert Wilson's work seems to concur with this view by claiming that visual modes of expression need to be understood through visual models of perception. Wilson's work is a three-dimensional composition or 'ballet of shape and space' (2000:70)

In respect of *The General's Daughter* respondents remembered small details and commented on the 'beautiful unsullied red of the inside of the handbag', the quality of the soldier's boots and the way the light shifted. Compositional relationships of objects, particularly with reference to colour, texture, line and scale were noticed and recalled, for example 'sand, chair forwards, raked stage...window sharply clearly defined...' This response, and several others like it, demonstrates the spatial and compositional relation one object had to another. Comments such as '...the movement of the fabric, feel of the sand, straight line of the decking, hardness of the boot' refer to the richness of composition experienced through the use of contrasting textures. References to height, depth and the spatial relationship of objects demonstrated spectators' awareness of the stage space as a three-dimensional composition which was articulated through shifts in light and over the duration of the performance, for example; the square shape of back wall in *The General's Daughter* '...undertook a number of significant transformations' in regard of the central character's situation; internal/external, open/closed space'. In *Homesick* the audience's images reflect this aspect as a more dynamic and visceral experience.

Composition was also interpreted. In this drawing which was produced as a response to *Homesick*, the participant has linked hand motifs to their own memories:





...the top hand was magnified ...it was distorted....it reminded me of a picture that I used to have in a book when I was a child, of a goblin that had these long, distorted fingers. And it was, just, it was really quite frightening because of that. But the other hand was quite small, and very dark because it was close to the curtain. So it was almost in contrast. And it was like a child's hand and this great big goblin hand. So that's that. And then the other point when hands really leapt out at me was after the female puppet had disposed of the male puppet, and she just sat there very calmly and wiped her hands on each other and on her dress. And that was as eerie to me as the image of the goblin hand. So I put the two things together, because they have that connection.

### *Homesick*

Clearly, the communicative potential of scenographic material is partly determined by the capacity of the spectator to attend to formal and compositional aspects. But how might this attention produce feeling or meaning?

### **Semiotic approaches to interpretation**

Semiotic approaches to theatre analysis, first developed in the 1930s (Aston and Savona, 1991: 7) have now been thoroughly incorporated into academic and popular critical discourses of theatre and have helped raise the visibility of scenography as a significant contributor to the complexity of sign systems that confront theatre audiences.



The design of and responses to *The General's Daughter* drew on semiotic approaches. Many participants noted their interpretation of images, for example '...escape (window), play (sand), work (sewing machine)'. Kennedy compares this kind of decoding to the literary device of metonymy and synecdoche where the design 'is based upon the contiguity of the presence on stage to the absence it represents' and is deciphered automatically, unconsciously (2001: 13). Several, though, saw the boots as metaphors for absent men. The unearthing of boots from sand led some to thoughts about death and burial and 'the disappeared'. In these interpretations, there is deliberate effort required to take account of the image and relate it to ideas addressed by the performance as a whole (Kennedy, 2001: 13).

Aston and Savona describe a four stage process which begins with 'the dramatist encoding the text'. Next, the director decodes the text in order to arrive at a *mise-en-scène*. The designer's contribution is to re-encode the text, through the designs and within a 'pre-determined or negotiated brief'. In the final stage the spectator decodes the production, engaging with 'the visual dimension as an integral aspect of the reception process' (1991: 142). This model suggests that there is a right way to read (decode) images and leaves little room for more complex operations.

In this exchange from a participant in *Homesick*, there is clearly an unresolved but productive tension between what things suggested, felt and might have meant for which the Aston and Savona model is inadequate.

- A I thought it was really evocative. I thought there was lots in it, and it's really useful to have time to reflect on it, rather than just going out and...
- Q Yes, going away. Yes.
- A Yes and to do it relatively soon as there were so many images of it. Just the final walking through the paper for me it felt like I could have been at Auschwitz or somewhere....The mad house. Sort of a feeling



of walking through other people's ashes. There were elements that I tried to make sense of, my brain was constantly trying to think logical, but my brain was constantly trying to make sense of the relationship between the three performers, who seemed quite childlike, and the four puppets. I felt uncomfortable when the fourth one came. I felt like I understood a relationship between the three people and then when the four puppets appeared I felt disturbed by that one.

### *Homesick*

Pavis has developed a semiotic approach to analysis to incorporate a much more dynamic account of the operation of theatre images and the active role of the spectator in making sense of them. He uses 'displacement' and 'condensation' to construct the two main axes of the processes of theatrical representation. Displacement is akin to metonymy in that it deals in references to the real world through connection and iconic referents, whilst condensation operates like metaphor, accumulating, juxtaposing and stylising elements which create their own logic or a new reality, that holds true within the performance space (Pavis, 2003: 314). The important point about such a framework is that it does not tie the operation of an image down to one mode or another. Responses in *The General's Daughter* contrasted the black riding boots, which 'signed power and authority and a certain class' with the battered soldiers' boots, 'masculine, warlike, workmanlike'. These observations show how objects and images can operate both through displacement and through condensation, and often simultaneously.

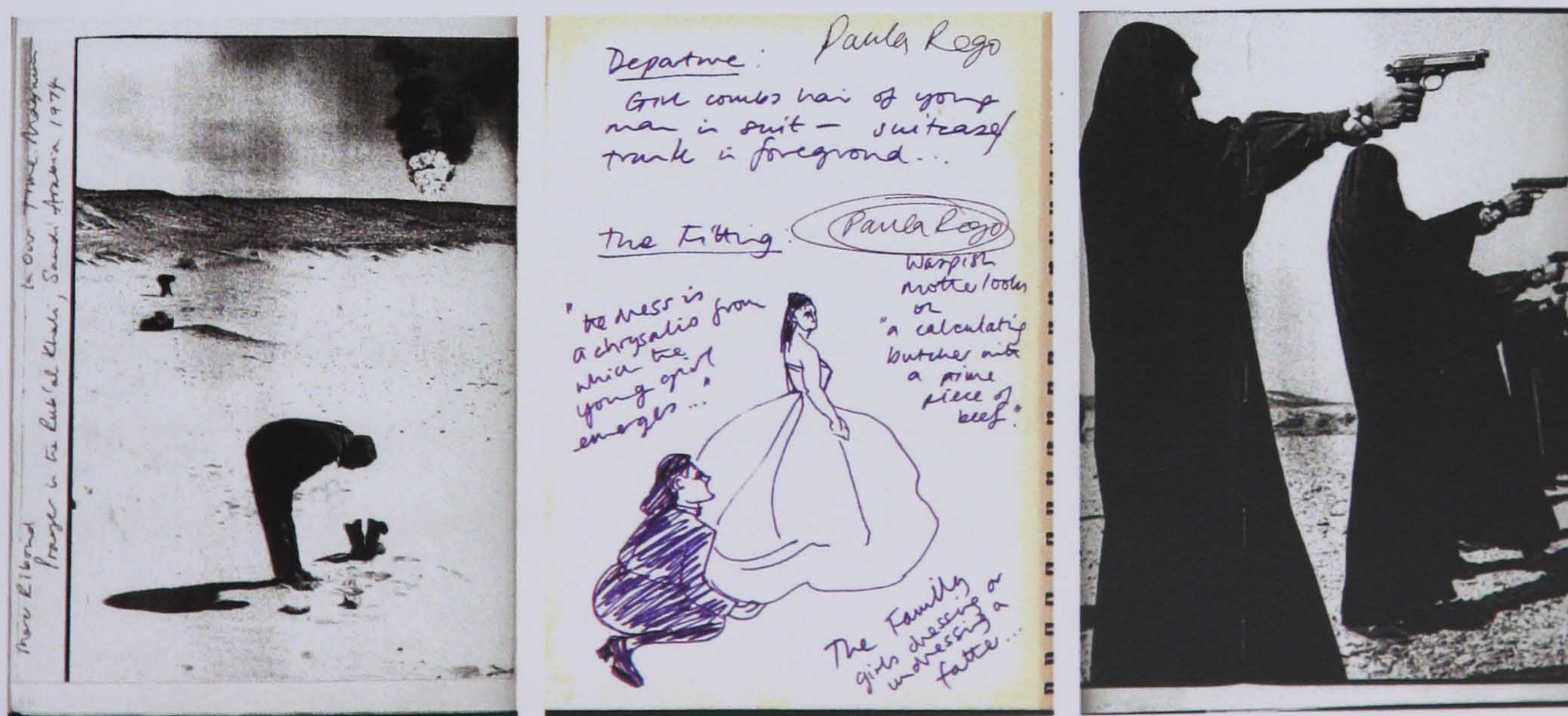
### **Polysemous images**

In the example above from *Homesick* the language used is provisional and uncertain. This accords with Barthes' descriptions of images that might be considered weaker and more rudimentary than language in that they appear to be less stable as signifiers, but accrue power through their being polysemous and therefore capable of signifying several things at once (Barthes, 1977: 37-39).

My development of design for *The General's Daughter* demonstrates how this works from the scenographer's point of view. The images



below were some of the things I looked at in trying to explore possible productive resonances with ideas in the Iphigenia text; death, sacrifice and the human consequences of war; becoming a woman, beauty, expectations and roles; women caught up in the machinery of war, often complicit in the justification and prosecution of war through support or co-operation. Attempting to explain in writing how these images are intended to work, however, can appear banal. My working method is to find ways to allow myself to be surprised by images, to leave room for accidents, to allow 'unconscious desires to filter into the working methods' (Pavis, 2003: 247). Barthes identifies three levels of meaning for the image; the informational, the symbolic and the 'obtuse' meaning. The first requires little or no analysis; it tells you what is happening. The second opens up the image, through semiotic analysis, to a range of potential meanings and significances. But the third, obtuse, meaning is 'the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive' and it demands a 'poetical' rather than an intellectual grasp. Despite its powerful hold, it is not possible to say exactly what this obtuse meaning of the images signifies because it is 'outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution' (Barthes, 1977: 61). What can be accounted for in words seems obvious. What is interesting to me are the gaps in the articulation.



Pages from sketchbook for *The General's Daughter* Joslin McKinney



Ubersfeld describes the pleasure that audiences derive in attending to theatrical performance as being framed by a 'game of oppositions'. This includes the pleasure of understanding and of not understanding; the pleasure of maintaining an intellectual distance and of being carried away by one's emotions...the pleasure of desiring and of being protected from one's passions' (Ubersfeld, 1982: 127). This game suggests a continuous circulation between attempting to make sense of the theatre event and of being caught up in it. My respondents reflected this oscillation between absorption and reflection. For example, the boot polishing sequence in *The General's Daughter* found one respondent 'circulating between pleasurable voyeurism and conscious reflection'.

In *Forest Floor* this cycling between absorption in the image and reflection on its possible meaning became active as participants were often responsible in the creation of an image.

...somebody put one heart into my hand, and I had the white glove on and opened my hand and saw this little heart in it, I thought, "I'll shine my spotlight down onto that" and I shone my spotlight down onto it and that was a really powerful image and I was kind of fascinated by it and then ...somebody took it off me and... gave me two more...and then I had two hearts in my hand and so then I started to flex it and kind of ... it became almost sexual, it was like a heartbeat, I was actually making the heart beat, that's what I was trying to do, make the heart beat...

### *Forest Floor*

## **Attention**

Barthes' claim that every society attempts to assuage the 'terror of uncertain signs' (1977: 39) finds some resonance in Jonathan Crary's 'genealogy of attention' which shows how modernity has shaped concepts of attention and human subjectivity (Crary 2001: 2) and attempted to regulate the effect of the image.

Attention is the means by which an individual observer can transcend those subjective limitations and make perception *its own*, and attention is at the same time a means by which a



perceiver becomes open to control and annexation by external agencies (2001: 5).

Attention can induce docility, passive acceptance, absorption or manageable patterns of consumption and loss of self but may also allow us to focus on what we as individuals choose to attend to and how we shape our own perceptions of the world. Distraction, the apparent opposite of attention, has been associated with deviancy and lack of control and social disintegration. But it may come about when attention reaches a threshold and disintegrates leading to 'distraction, reverie, dissociation and trance' (Crary, 2001: 46-49). Attention and distraction, then, exist on a continuum 'the two ceaselessly flow into one another, as part of a social field in which the same imperatives and forces incite one and the other' (Crary, 2001: 51).

*The General's Daughter* was the most controlling of the performances, not simply through the arrangement of the audience in relation to the stage, but also in the way it was conceived. Set, costumes and objects, in particular were carefully encoded. Moments of the performance were designed and were reported to be entrancing and mesmerising, for example the boot polishing scenes and the wedding dress transformation. The audience were at these points being wholly caught up in the spectacle, engaging their attention whilst potentially disarming their faculties for discrimination. But moments like these were contrasted with elements that always threatened to upset or interfere with any prolonged sense of mystification. The injection of patently real materials (old floorboards, sand, soldiers' boots) into the stylised room space, the deliberate provocation of some of the imagery and the sheer proliferation of visual signs meant that there was plenty of opportunity for signs to be read and mis-read and for seamless attention to be interrupted and so disintegrate into a potentially productive and open-ended space for reception and meaning making.



There is a recurrent theme to responses in all three performances that centres on a slippage between images which are aesthetically engaging and images which unsettle and disturb and which allow the audience to shift between attention and distraction. This comment from *Homesick* is typical:



When the wind machine first started, it started to feel a bit unstable because with the walls or with the material moving, obviously these started shifting as well on the floor. And then they came down. There was a lovely poetic quality about them, but there was also something quite unstable about them...Both pleasant and a bit of frisson came from it as well, because you never knew what would happen next, sometimes people stuck their heads through the material. Sometimes it became, it wobbled, it became unstable. It was beautiful watching the shadows but sometimes they came very close and went over the top, which one in particular which looked fantastic but also quite menacing.

### *Homesick*

In fact, the instability seemed to work as focus of attention itself.

Kristeva identifies 'the semiotic' and 'the symbolic' as two modalities of the same signifying process (Kristeva, 1986: 92). The symbolic is tied to language, communication and the regulating function of theory, order and identity (Lechte, 1990: 130). The semiotic refers particularly to non-verbal signs which, although they cannot be grasped by conceptual thought, are nonetheless an essential part of our experience and development. As infants, our world is informed by



semiotic understandings that precede and transcend language, focused through the 'chora', a mobile, provisional articulation and the pre-condition for attaining a signifying position. The chora 'precedes and underlies figuration' and is analogous to 'vocal or kinetic rhythm' (Kristeva, 1986: 94). Scenographic distraction seems to provide a chora-like state which is an important part of the whole signifying process. Rich and distracting material; colours, patterns, shapes, movement and rhythm are brought into focus through spectators' attempts to identify representations of the symbolic.

### **Scenographic punctum**

Barthes describes two kinds of attention that photographic images might lead to. Studium is 'to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them...to understand them' it is 'a contract arrived at between creators and consumers' (Barthes, 1993: 27-28).

This kind of attention was particularly evident in *The General's Daughter* in the diligent tone of the responses. Almost all the participants were willing to engage with the scenographic material and entered into the spirit of the contract which studium sets up. But more arresting insights revolve around moments of perception which break through polite interest and diligent attention and create a scenographic punctum.

Punctum is, Barthes claims, extra to the photographer's intentions. He cites instances of photographs that appear calculated to move, but fail to touch him (1993: 47). The intent in the composition is too obvious. What he delights in are the details which pierce through the seamless, coherent surface of the picture and speak to him individually. Punctum cannot be coded. Punctum occurs when a detail attracts attention and moves the viewer beyond appreciation, and arouses sharper, individual response through an emotional or visceral reaction. In most instances of scenography compositional control is such that instances of



scenographic punctum might seem rare, if not impossible. In accounts of the liveness of theatre much is made of the potential for each performance to be qualitatively different. The complexity of the on-stage signs in combination with a newly-constituted audience provides an exchange of energy which can yield new nuances and possibilities at each performance (McAuley, 1999: 246). Scenographic elements, in themselves, would appear to be immune to this kind of possibility; computer controlled lighting and monumental settings seem to militate against the accidental detail breaking through a surface of well-ordered and carefully prepared material. But there are ways that scenography might approach the conditions of punctum. The wedding dress scene in *The General's Daughter* is an example. Although the change happened in full view of the audience, the final image of a woman in a full veil, only her eyes visible came as a shock to some. This sense of surprise might lead either to a feeling of appreciation of stagecraft, a studium-type response but it can also lead to a level of insight which feels meaningful to the individual rather than on a general cultural level. Some of these moments are uncomfortable and disturbing. Another writes of the same performance that the woman in black standing in the shadows holding the boots made her feel sick although she did not know why. Nonetheless, it remains as a key moment of recognition in the rest of their account of the relationship between the two female characters.



Wedding dress scene, *The General's Daughter*, photo: Craig Lomas



## Watching

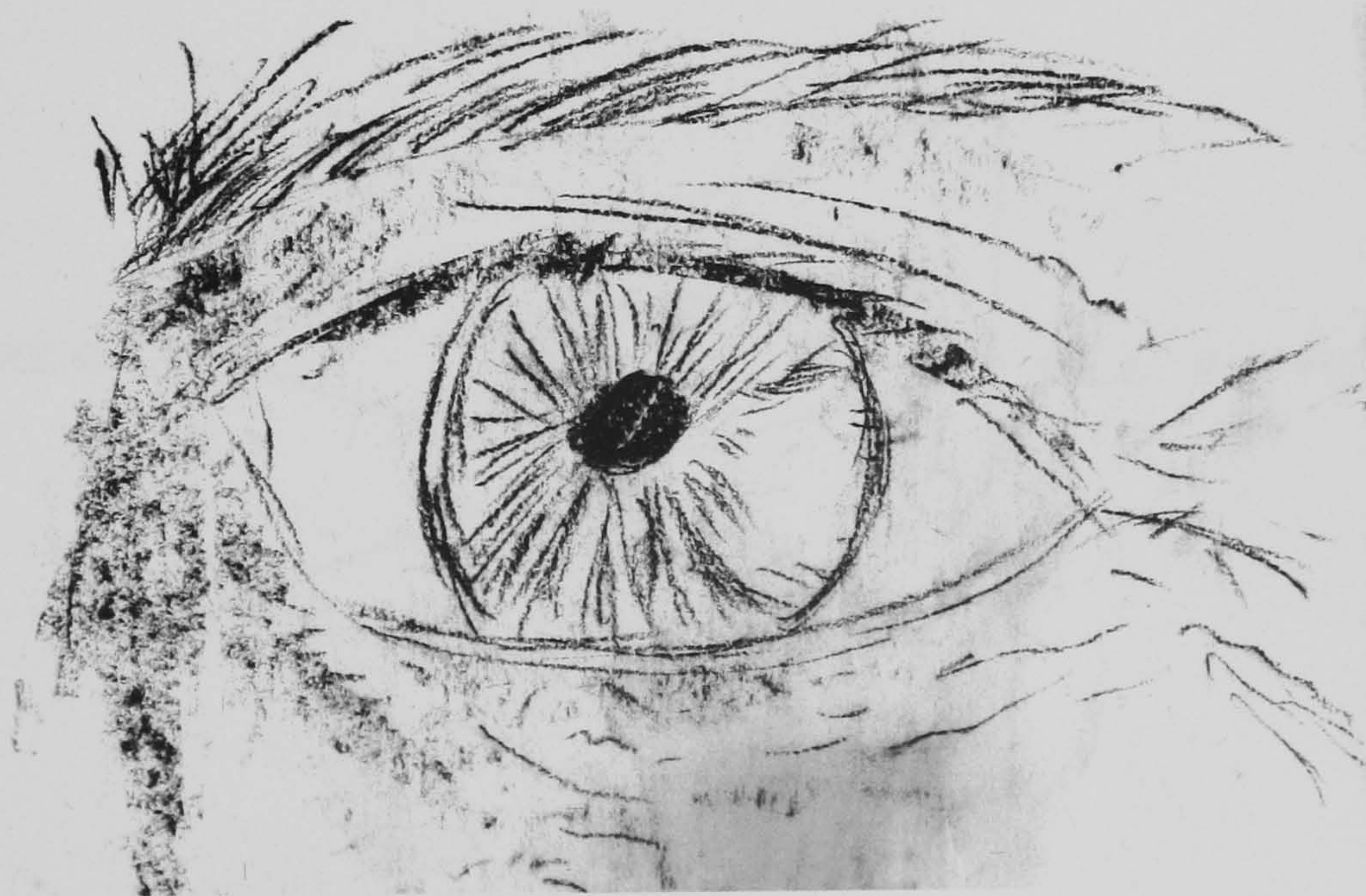
Audiences for all three performances showed they were conscious of themselves watching.

...the sense of height and confinement, combined with the pristine white and the reduction of the human presence to eyes alone was disturbing. The inclusion of the 9/11 photographs enhanced this sense – they had a specific nature which I wanted to resist, but what had gone before also altered the way I looked at them – they have a kind of visual beauty at odds with their nature and this was enhanced by the sensitisation to movement, shape, composition and colour that had preceded it. Yet to respond in that way to that material gives a sense of guilt.

### *The General's Daughter*

This respondent is simultaneously attracted and repelled by the images, acutely aware of her position as viewer, watching herself watching the performance. Lacan's theories on the psychology of the gaze emphasise how seeing always means being seen and that 'we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world' (Grosz, 1990: 79).

In this response to *Homesick*, the participant feels themselves to be part of a network of gazes; those of the other members of the audience and the performers:



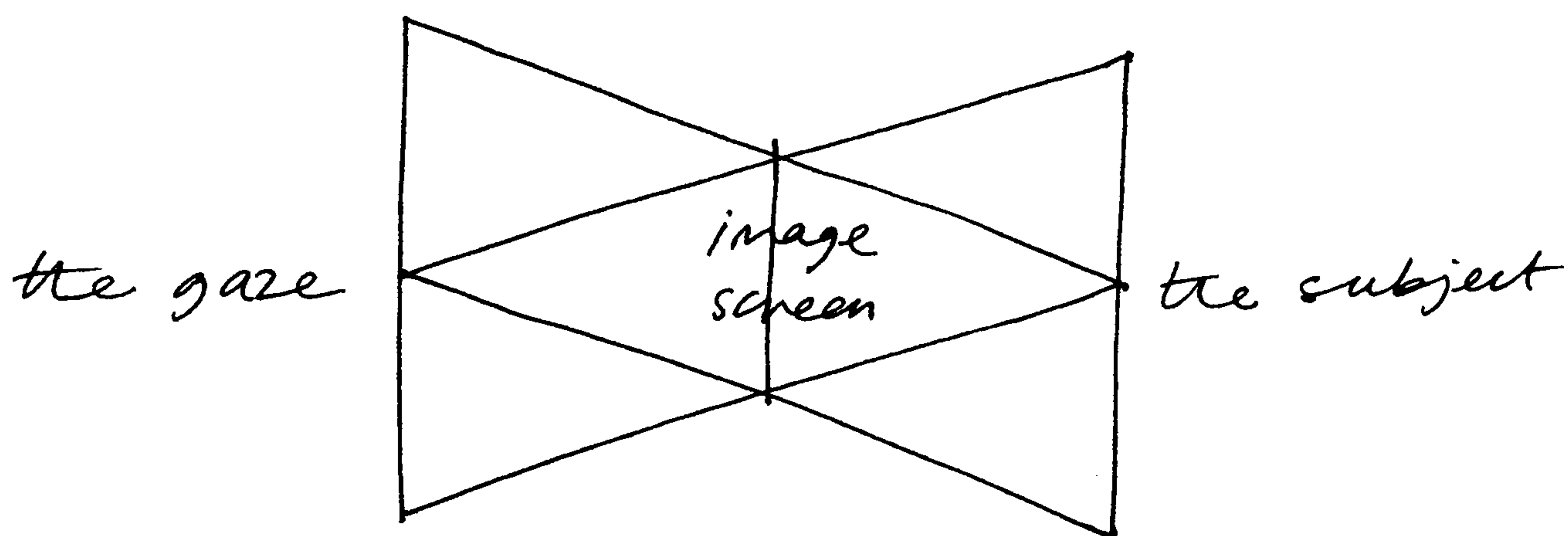


And then I moved on to this rather old looking eye and I drew that. And I particularly wanted it to be old because I suppose I wanted to portray someone who had a certain amount of experience watching me and I felt watched in the performance. I felt looked at, not only by the other audience members because we were all muddled in together, but also, to a certain extent, out of the corner of the eye by the performers as well.

### *Homesick*

This challenges the traditional account of the subject as master of the object being viewed as exemplified through the development of theories of perspective, familiar in Renaissance painting and playhouses. But this privileging of the subject is a result of adherence to the illusion of consciousness and objectivity. Lacan's 'mirror stage' identifies the development of our identities as individuals, where as small children we begin to understand ourselves as individual entities separate from the mother. But the image of ourselves as the complete and coherent entities that appears to stare back at us from the mirror is illusory. The gaze, or how I imagine I am being looked at, is the 'underside of consciousness' and disrupts, questions or threatens the (illusory) sense of self. 'The gaze I encounter...is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.' (Lacan, 1977: 84).

Lacan describes this in a diagram:



Two superimposed triangles represent the subject and the gaze.



The subject depends on the gaze for visibility. 'What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which...I am *photo-graphed* (Lacan, 1977: 106).

But the relationship between the subject and the gaze is fraught. The subject's fragile sense of completeness is forever undermined by unconscious desire for the time, before the mirror stage, of 'pure plenitude', where child and mother exist in a 'hermetically sealed circuit of need and satisfaction' (Grosz, 1990: 34-5). The gaze operates to reveal this lack of completeness and threatens to dismantle illusions of self-hood.

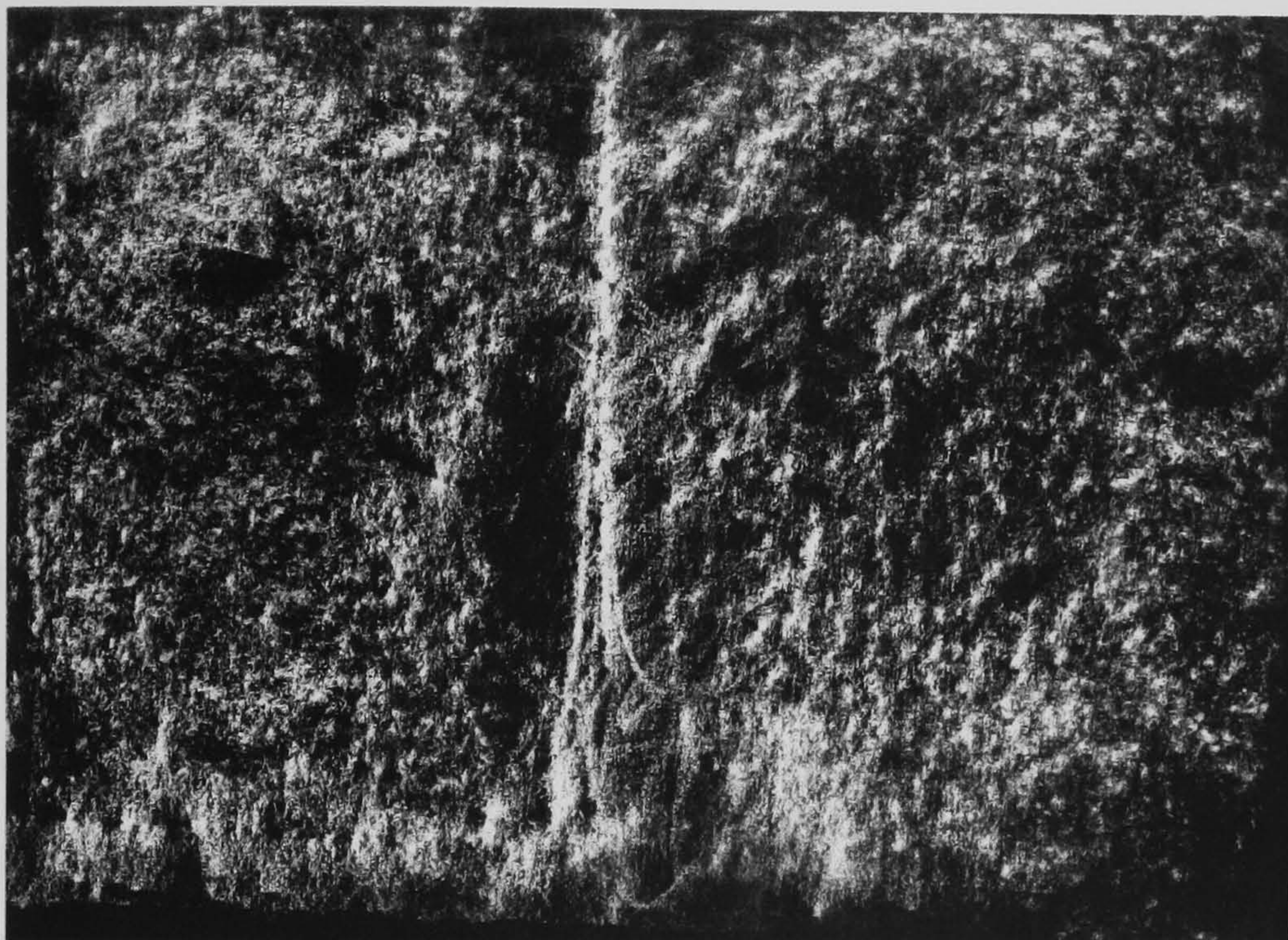
The image-screen at the centre of the diagram is a means of mediation between the subject and the gaze. Hal Foster takes up Lacan's notion that a picture is a trap for the gaze. He explores the 'atavistic tropes of preying and tampering, battling and negotiating' that Lacan calls on and claims that picture-making and viewing are the means by which we can tame, pacify, 'manipulate and moderate the gaze'. A picture is a screen (or a mask) between the subject and the gaze and allows the subject to view the object without being 'blinded by the gaze' (Foster, 1996:140). The scenographic image also provides a screen which presents a tamed view of the world. The screen of scenography can be an object of contemplation and also a means of speculation about the world and the fears and desires which lay beyond the performance. In Lacan's terms, the spectator 'maps' herself in the image and 'isolates the function of the screen and plays with it' knowing that what lies beyond is the gaze. 'The screen is here the locus of mediation' (Lacan, 1977: 107). Like viewers, scenographers draw on what they feel and understand about the world. The scenographic screen acts as mediation for the scenographer between that which is being represented and the gaze 'pulsatile, dazzling and spread out' (Lacan, 1977: 89). The following comment reflects the idea of the screen:



There was a real sense of dead bodies through the little puppets...The bodies being tossed into the silk. We're all dressed in a similar way....And at the end the cloak and the two gloves as a disembowelled body.

### *Forest Floor*

The comments in the example below from *Homesick* present an account of the way the scenography worked which echoes Lacan's diagram and points towards the gaze beyond the screen.



...the one picture that I really wanted to create was the idea of the whiteness, the lightness of it, against which there were hidden things behind...like a brass rubbing... there was a lot of history there, and we were witnessing something that had happened, that looked like it had happened before ...it wasn't just about the little group of people that were doing the things there ...It evoked a very particular memory...about, being about eight years old and my cousin and I got stuck in her attic. And her house is a very, very old Elizabethan house and the attic was very high up and really wibbly-wobbly. And the big door closed on us and we were both really scared and really excited ...and there was lots of big old cupboards and chests and drawers and things that we didn't dare open because we were too frightened. But we weren't scared-scared, we were excited by it.

### *Homesick*

But where Lacan's diagram uses geometry to describe the scopic drive, this respondent is clearly referring to a tangible sense of lived space. In the evocations of colour, space and feeling, there are strong



suggestions of Kristeva's semiotic chora here, too. And it is this other sense of material; that which occupies space and which we become acquainted with through our bodily senses that I will address next. Garner's comparison of the scenic field to sculpture and painting is useful allowing us to consider concepts from the field of visual studies within the context of performance, but it does not account for the spatial aspects of scenography.

## **Scenographic Construction**

### **Embodied and somatosensory responses**

A significant minority of spectators attending *The General's Daughter* adopted viewing strategies other than semiotic. Several identified kinesic qualities as a focus for their attention. There was an impact made through the materials themselves; the colours, the observed weight and movement of sand, silk and paper, the smell of the wood and the sand and also the somatosensory experience and embodied knowledge that viewing provoked.

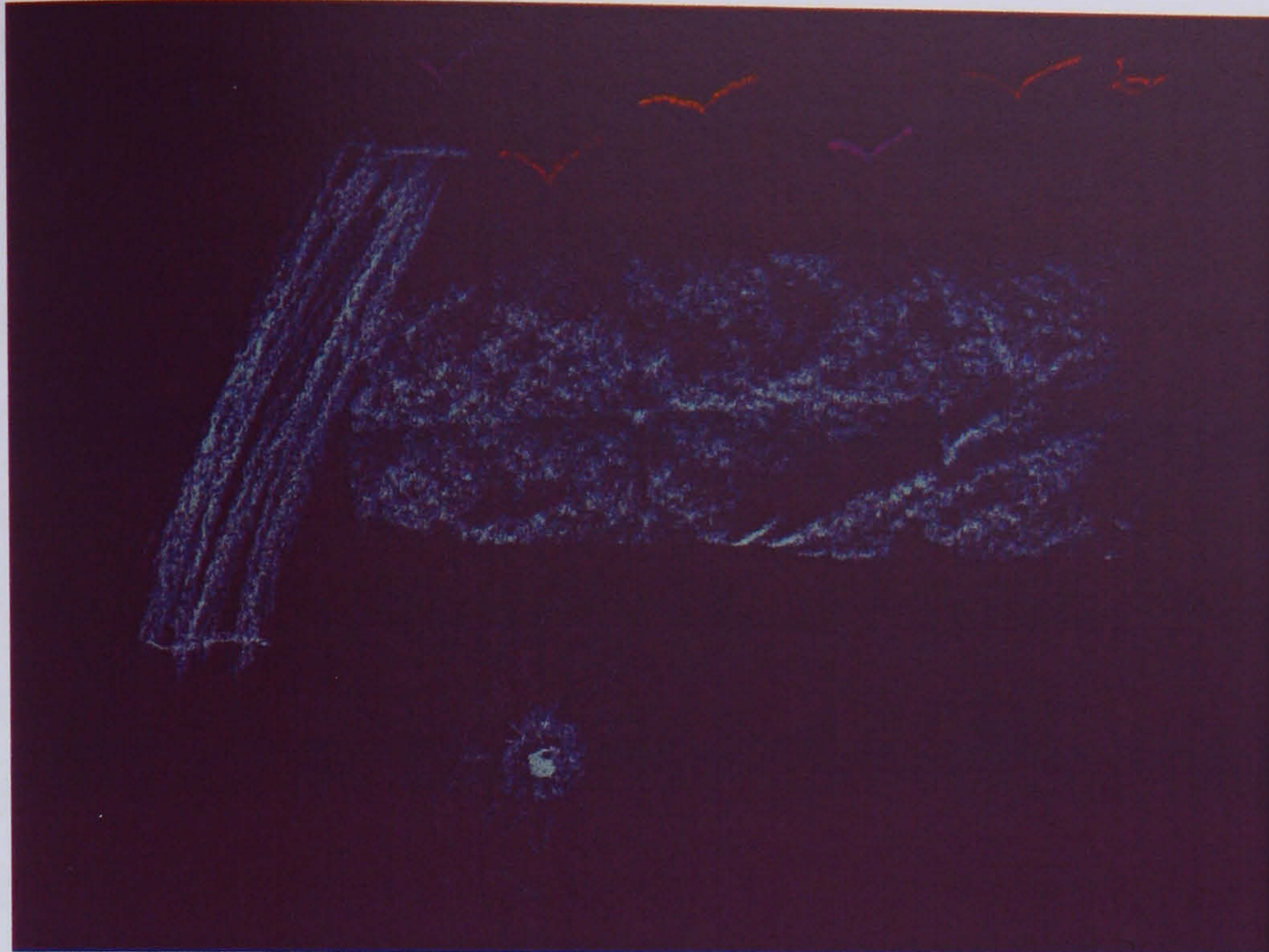
Accounts of the communication between the audience and the stage that centre on the viewing of the human performer have some bearing on the potential of scenography to communicate in a multi-sensory way and not only as a network of signs. Sauter identifies sensory responses as part of the nature of communication through the theatre event. The appearance of a performer on stage will provoke automatic reactions in the audience, who spontaneously recognise the mood and the mental presence of a fellow human being (Sauter, 2000: 7). Garner goes further and claims that the theatre 'links audience with performer in a kind of corporeal mimetic identification' (Garner, 1994: 4). Simon Shepherd shows that this is not just a matter of identification, but of recognition and response that is registered in the body of the spectator through 'muscular empathy' (Shepherd, 2006: 74), stimulated 'as a



consequence of what the eyes see' (Shepherd and Wallis, 2004: 207). Polanyi describes how in viewing objects, we attend from internal processes (which we cannot feel in themselves) to qualities of the object outside, transposing bodily experiences into the perception of objects. We 'incorporate it into our body - or extend our body to include it - so that we come to dwell in it.' (Polanyi, 1967: 16). More recently Neuro-physiologist Antonio Damasio has described how 'the brain is truly the body's captive'(Damasio, 2000: 150) in regard to the way higher levels of consciousness and creativity arise from the basic level of 'life regulation' and 'sensory patterns signalling pain, pleasure and emotion' (Damasio, 2000: 55). The sensory modalities are 'visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and somatosensory'. This last refers to sensory systems inherent in the body and includes the sensing of changes in 'the chemical environment' of cells through the operation of the nervous system and the visceral dimension of our internal organs influenced by flows of blood which might be registered through feelings of calm or agitation, flushing skin or sweating palms. The musculoskeletal functions are those which allow the possibility of 'muscular empathy' and they also account for the vestibular system which 'maps the co-ordinates of the body in space' (Damasio, 2000:153). The somatosensory also includes touch and the sensors in the skin which inform us about texture, form and weight.

Several responses demonstrate an appreciation of the somatosensory aspects of *The General's Daughter*, for example; 'I felt absorbed into the colour ...the fall of the silk ...I could just watch and admire its beauty' another 'enjoyed being transported by the aural, visual, spatial and performative elements'. These participants attended to the way the materials were being animated, the way they moved and sounded, the way they might feel against the skin. This was even more marked in *Homesick*:





This is a picture of a feeling. This is a picture of the moment when the lads were folding the cloth. And they wafted it, and I was stood right in front of it....And it was like a white breeze, because everything around me was white... The white breeze blew in my face, but I could hear the birds singing. The birds were like colour in the background. So the birds are flying above here, and they're coloured. And I was very aware of, beyond this white breeze, this bright light shining...being diffused by the curtains. So it's a picture of images and sounds and feelings, that particular picture.

### *Homesick*

Not only are the visual, auditory and somatosensory senses referred to, they also inform each other; the breeze is white and the bird-song is colour. Maurice Merleau-Ponty says that this synaesthetic perception comes about because of the way the senses intercommunicate.

The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature, and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight. The form of a fold in linen or cotton shows us the resilience or dryness of the fibre, the coldness or warmth of the material...One sees the weight of a block of cast iron which sinks in the sand, the fluidity of water and the viscosity of syrup. In the same way, I hear the hardness and unevenness of cobbles in the rattle of a carriage...(Merleau-Ponty 1962: 229-230).

Sight is inseparable from and informed by our other senses.

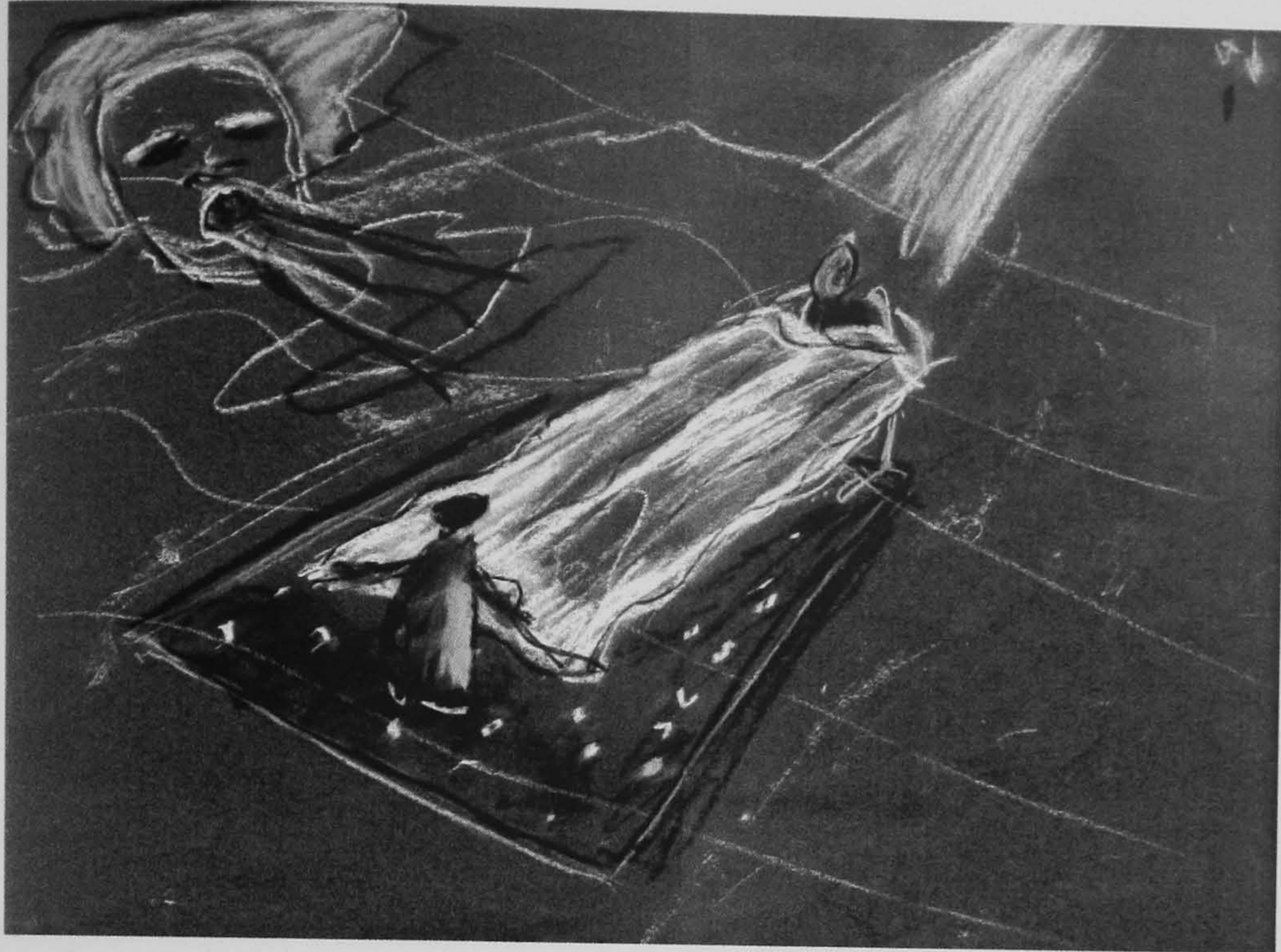


## Phenomenology

Garner shows how notions of embodiment and phenomenology help move us away from quasi-scientific accounts of theatre reception through objective understanding in the abstract and towards the theatre 'as it is given to consciousness in direct experience' (1994: 2). At the basis of his argument are Merleau-Ponty's ideas about the way we experience the world, directly and through our senses. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is an attempt to capture experience, in direct and 'primitive' essence and at a stage before intellectual analysis begins to sort and edit and render the experience as an artificial 'reconstruction' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: vii-ix). What is of particular value for the study of theatre reception is the idea that 'there is an immediate equivalence between the orientation of the visual field and the awareness of one's own body as the potentiality of that field' (1962: 206). And it is this which leads Garner to claim a particular connection between the performing body and the bodies of each of the spectators.

Garner claims that whereas the presence of performers will set in train a phenomenological appreciation on the part of the audience, the scenic space is an objectified and detached spectacle (Garner, 1994: 3). The objects on stage might be pulled into the phenomenological field, for they are always more than that which they sign but for Garner this only happens through the actor, who is 'a site of agency within a world of things' (1994: 88). My work demonstrates a more interactive relationship. Performers in all three performances were, at times, viewed as theatre objects themselves and in many instances the scenographic elements communicated at a phenomenological level independent of the agency of the performers. This is exemplified particularly in the drawings from *Homesick* where participants could record their impressions of the performance without (necessarily) the need to analyse first. The movement of the cloth and the falling paper at the end featured in many of the drawings.





It is a drawing of a face blowing wind like on old maps . . . wind and generation of air . . . a sensory experience. . . . The double cloth . . . the way we were gradually moved into the corner. The cloth got bigger and took over the space.

### *Homesick*

And even though *The General's Daughter* audience were observing at a distance, the remarks above point towards an application of their appreciation of the weight, feel and movement of silk, sand and paper gained elsewhere and re-activated through the performance. The comment earlier which recorded a feeling of being absorbed into colour echoes Merleau-Ponty's reflection on the experience of colour:

'...as I fix my eyes on an object or allow them to wander, or else wholly submit myself to the event, the same colour appears to me as superficial (*Oberflächenfarbe*) - being in a definite location in space, and extending over an object - or else it becomes an atmospheric colour (*Raumfarbe*) and diffuses itself all around the object. Or I may feel it in my eye as a vibration of my gaze; or finally it may pass on to my body a similar manner of being, fully pervading me, so that it is no longer entitled to be called a colour (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 227).

Merleau-Ponty's account of perception of an object is not simply that of viewing a flat surface as in a picture, but is informed by our knowledge of how the object appears from different viewpoints or perspectives and by our appreciation of the action of time and memory on that object.



My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams around things whose presence is not incompatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved with it: they are ahead of reality, in the realm of the imaginary.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: x)

A sense of phenomenological encounter is present in many responses from my audiences. In *The General's Daughter* it tended to be in the manner of respondents reflecting on their engagement with the nature of the materials (how they occupied the performance environment, how they restrained or obliterated the performers, how they smelt, how they moved) through observation, but drawing on previous bodily, sensory understandings which the scenography unlocked. In *Homesick*, the experience was, by design, aimed at stimulating a phenomenological encounter where there was often no fixed point for viewing and objects and images offered themselves up as an experience rather than a narrative. The images they made as a result contain references to the play of light and colour, articulations of space and scale and the kind of 'fleeting tactile sensations' that Merleau-Ponty refers to. And they merge with their own memories and daydreams. In *Forest Floor*, a phenomenological engagement was a precursor to engaging with the performance:

Speaker 1: I was pretty disengaged when I started and it wasn't until actually that moment when I had the snowflakes in my hand I felt impelled to do something. And then I did it and suddenly that was great, I felt engaged from that point on. And actually I found my mood lightening from that moment of engagement and I just stopped worrying about the sense of trying to...

Speaker 2: I wasn't trying to make sense of anything. I was trying to get a sense of what the mood was, what the act was, because to begin with it was really uncertain. It was like is this mysterious? Is it meant to be romantic? Is it meant to be like some kind of childhood nightmare? I couldn't work it out but I think towards the end it was kind of mysterious, but yet it was fun and enlightening at the same time.

*Forest Floor*



## The poetic object

The design for *Homesick* developed, in part, from Bachelard's ideas about the house as a 'privileged entity for the phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space' (Bachelard, 1994: 3). The spaces inside a house are familiar and ordinary and yet capable of unlocking an 'unfathomable store of daydreams of intimacy' (Bachelard, 1994: 78). Lacan's screen is once again brought to mind by Bachelard's identification of the wardrobe as the site where 'there exists a center or order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder.' (Bachelard, 1994: 79).

This response from *Homesick* confirms the potential of the wardrobe:



I've drawn a wardrobe, because that seemed like the centre of...well, everything came out of there. It was all the secrets and dreams and stuff. I put in some white paper because that was... I was concentrating on that a lot, the white paper that was everywhere.

### *Homesick*

The theatre object becomes an object of 'production' by virtue of the temporal/spatial dimension of performance. As Ubersfeld remarks:

The object is a concrete presence – not so much the iconic figure of a particular aspect of the off-stage referent as the referent itself, not the image of a world but rather a concrete world. Consider the actor's body and the sheer work it produces. It acts (it moves, dances, demonstrates); much of what makes up theatre is in this shown-acted aspect of the body, whether or not the theatrical text explicitly takes this into account. Likewise there is interplay with the object – the shown, the exhibited, constructed or deconstructed objects on stage, the object or



ostentation, of play or production. The object is a ludic object. (Ubersfeld, 1999:124)

This view of the theatre object places it alongside the human performers in terms of its performing potential. Tadeusz Kantor is perhaps the practitioner who has taken the idea of the performing objects furthest. Objects with little obvious value or purpose, things considered as 'trash...almost a void' in everyday life can, in theatre, become the means by which the imagination of the audience is activated and the 'highest values, being, death and love' can be realised (Kantor, 1993: 30). For Kantor, the more despised or contemptible the object, the greater its potential to transcend everyday status and reflect the essence of life (Kantor, 1993:124).

In *Forest Floor* the potential of objects was often activated through the agency of the doll/puppets, which were simply constructed from calico and weighted like beanbags. In the performance, they appeared, at times, to be smaller versions of the human performers/participants:

...because of these costumes, all the characters and including all the witnesses somehow became dehumanised while these puppets became awfully human.... And emotionally, I didn't link to what happened to real human characters, but I linked to these [puppets] and also, at one point, there was this moving image of where the costume was alone on the floor but had this human configuration and that touched me emotionally while anything else I thought, "So what?"

### *Forest Floor*

The same puppet objects were used in *Homesick*, too, with a similar effect

I found it incredibly sad....especially the puppets... the puppet sequences for me were just horrific. I don't know why they were so sad but they almost made me want to cry. I think what's so powerful about it is the simplicity and the seemingly lack of complexity which therefore draws you in and allows you to project onto it. Because... the puppets were lacking in detail, and very simple notions of love or gestures seemed to depict love or rejection, then it allowed you to fill in all the gaps.... So it was an invitation to project that moment quite extremely. Whereas with the text, the text at the beginning, and the figures, you



were trying to read their horror and trying to read narrative into that. The puppets just seemed to invite subjectivity.

### *Homesick*

#### **Spatiality**

Space itself, and not just the objects within it, has been conceptualised as a means of thinking, imagining and mediating. Lefebvre's account of the dual nature of social space is that it is at once both an actual location, a means of seeing oneself in a particular position and in relation to others (people, objects) and, at the same time, a space of mediation, where one seeks to apprehend something else beyond the plane surface, behind each opaque form. For Lefebvre, our perception, conception and actual experience of spaces interpenetrate each other and superimpose themselves (Lefebvre, 1991: 86). In this passage Lefebvre gives us a phenomenological account of the experience of deciphering space:

Objects touch one another, feel, smell and hear one another. Then they contemplate one another with eye and gaze. One truly gets the impression that every shape in space, every spatial plane, constitutes a mirror and produces a mirage effect; that within each body the rest of the world is reflected, and referred back to, in an ever-renewed to-and-fro or reciprocal reflection, an interplay of shifting colours, lights and forms (Lefebvre 1991: 183).

The experience of space is bodily as well as conceptual and a simple change in position or surroundings can make 'what was cryptic become limpidly clear'. This movement from obscurity to enlightenment is a process of decipherment which is a perpetual negotiation between oneself and one's surroundings, physically and cognitively (Lefebvre 1991:183).

*Homesick* set up a dialectically productive relationship between an actual (and for many of the participants, a well-known) space and an imagined space:



I thought it was a great way of using that space within a space, which is a space that is very familiar to us all, to most people who experienced the performance. And it really did serve the purpose of creating a separate space. You actually believed in that space. Yes, you had in the back of your mind you were in the Performance Centre, but it did work, I think, as a space within a space and it was very believable. I think because you were aware that it was fabricated, but somehow that made it more believable. Because there were gaps in the walls and you were aware that it was constructed.

### *Homesick*

In the above passage, the speaker uses 'believability' as a measure of their engagement in the performance. The interplay between the concrete reality of the space of the venue and the scenographic interventions of *Homesick* afforded this viewer an imaginative experience where a familiar space was reconfigured and re-imagined. Lefebvre and Soja after him have used the idea of a 'third' space to conceptualise spatial imagination which is potentially transformative.

Lefebvre's trialectics of space considers aspects of social space from three different perspectives. The first, 'spatial practice', refers to the way space is perceived and it reflects dominant social principles in material form through, for example, 'the daily life of a tenant in a government subsidized high-rise housing project' or the motorway system. 'Representations of space' are the ways we conceive and intellectually engage with space; in contemporary western societies the languages of politics and science tend to dominate this perspective. 'Representational spaces' provide the third perspective. This refers to space as it is lived, making 'symbolic use' of physical space, drawing on 'systems of non-verbal symbols and signs' (Lefebvre, 1991: 38-39). These three perspectives; space as perceived, conceived and lived, are in constant play, shifting in relation to each other according to the particular social or historical context within which space is produced (Lefebvre, 1991: 46).



Soja points out that Lefebvre is particularly interested in the third perspective because it represents a strategic location, a space of 'radical openness' from which to transform social space. 'Thirdspace' as Soja has coined it (Soja, 1996: 68) acts to break open the binary of the practice of perceived space and the theory of conceived space by being

...simultaneously material-and-metaphorical, real-and-imagined, concretely grounded in spatial practices yet also represented in literary and aesthetic imagery, imaginative recombinations, epistemological insight, and so much more.

(Soja 2000: 24)

The 'multiplicitous representations' available through Thirdspace offer an alternative to the dominant modes of spatial practice and theory (Soja, 2000: 28). The 'non-verbal subliminality' of representational spaces which foregrounds the 'potential insightfulness of art' is crucial here, for it offers a different way of thinking (Soja, 1996: 67). For Soja this makes Thirdspace a terrain of social struggle and potential emancipation (Soja, 1996: 68). This is, admittedly, beyond the immediate scope of my scenographic work. However, Thirdspace reflects all experiences from the most local and individual to the global. The simultaneously material and metaphorical milieu of Thirdspace makes it a potentially rich site for collective cultural exchange and individual experience and discovery. The following response to *Homesick* reflects the 'simultaneously material-and-metaphorical' nature of the scenography:





It made me reflect on themes about childhood and growing up and family. And it seemed to me an experience that alternated between a reassuring place and an unnerving place. So the figures that were moving around the space were very unnerving, yet when they moved through the space, one put their hand on my, on the small of my back which was reassuring. I felt the whole journey was an unknown quantity, but that towards the ending, I think the message was everything's going to be alright. I think that's the one thing that came through to me.

### *Homesick*

The concept of Thirdspace, therefore, offers a model of spatial sensibility and spatial thinking which helps to explain how the experience of viewing scenography might lead to new insights about the world and about oneself.

### **Projection**

Another way of conceiving spatial sensibility is to consider twentieth-century art practices that have employed projection as a speculative and exploratory process. Luigi Prestinenzza Puglisi examines Marcel Duchamp's work *La mariee mise a nu par ses celibataires, meme* (also known as *The Large Glass*) a project which stretched over a decade and developed through a series of drawings and paintings into a mixed media work which incorporated found objects as well as painting. This work can be seen as a series of projections (Prestinenzza Puglisi, 1999:



30-38), step by step stretching, extending, distorting, translating images and objects. The development of the work is a process of thinking through the manipulation of materials. Projection in this context becomes a means of arriving at ideas by throwing forward to a place where objects and concepts can be viewed, contemplated, elaborated (Prestinenzza Puglisi, 1999: 79). Projection opens up meaning through operating conceptually and concretely simultaneously. Duchamp's art objects, extracted from the everyday, articulate themselves in space, take up space, are themselves and simultaneously go beyond their obvious use. And the process by which this going beyond is revealed is a crucial part of the work. Projection is a key strategy in spatial thinking and gives access to something like a Thirdspace in that it provides imaginative recombinations and new insights.

Speaker 6 I quite liked moments where – I don't know whether it goes with what you've just been saying but – where I was looking at individual things and felt, oh, they're all cut in the shapes of hearts. I mean, I didn't do anything with the thought, but I just thought it.

Q Were you using your light to look at it as well?

Speaker 6 Yeah, I was. I was kind of purposeful. Purposeful and thinking, oh, they're all in hearts. And I liked the accumulation. Going back to the beginning and doing it again, I liked that a lot. And I liked it for its own sake, not necessarily because of narrative emotions, but just for its own sake we're doing it. And I liked those tubes very much indeed and got quite excited when the first person picked them up. But I liked that just for its own sake again, not a narrative

### *Forest Floor*

The comments above reflect spatial thinking; that is using the objects and materials of the scenography as a mediation.

## **Scenographic Action**

### **Action**

Aristotle's concept of action emphasises ethical links between the dramatic action and human interaction in the world. Dramatic actions



model real-life dilemmas, presenting moral and ethical concerns. The characters in the drama are vehicles through which a course action is activated. This then allows a philosophical engagement with the values and consequences of human action in the real world (Shepherd and Wallis 2004: 167). In the modern era, dramatic action was seen to emanate from the acts of characters in charge of their own destiny rather than from predetermined forces. Further, action came to be seen not simply as that which illustrates moral and ethical values through mimesis; it also refers to the operation of drama as art. Shepherd and Wallis show how philosopher Suzanne Langer's consideration of action in the 1950s linked thinking in contemporary visual theory to dramatic criticism to emphasise how in drawing on underlying rhythms of 'natural' life and death, it is the rhythm itself and the abstraction of dynamic form which is powerful (Shepherd and Wallis, 2004: 169). This focus on form has, in recent years, moved attention in Theatre Studies from the text to the performer's body. Antonin Artaud's idea of 'spatial poetry' (Schumacher, 1989: 93) is a rare example of how the whole performance space activates these underlying rhythms by bringing scenography into dialogue with bodies. Watching Balinese dance provided a 'spatial density' of a network of non-verbal signs where sound, image and movement worked in a 'constant play of mirrors' (Artaud, 1970: 38). The costumes, for example, extended the dancers and their gestures as 'hieroglyphs' or re-creations of life rather than imitations of it (see Savarese, 2001: 74).

Those actors with their asymmetrical robes looking like moving hieroglyphs; not just the shape of their gowns, shifting the axis of the human figure, but creating a kind of second symbolic clothing standing beside the uniforms of those warriors entranced and perpetually at war, thus inspiring intellectual ideas or merely connecting all the criss-crossing of these lines with all the criss-crossing of spatial perspective. These mental signs have an exact meaning that only strikes one intuitively, but violently enough to make any translations into logical, discursive language useless (Artaud, 1970: 37).

The costumes appeared to him to be at times part of, and at times separate from, the dancers. The feathered tiers of the head-dresses



'tremble rhythmically, seeming *consciously* to answer the trembling bodies' (Artaud, 1970: 41) but the costumes also serve to contain and define the movements of the dancers within the geometry of the stage:

...the folds of these robes curving above their buttocks, holding them up as if suspended in the air, as if pinned onto the backdrop, prolonging each of their leaps into flight (Artaud 1970: 46).

Contemporary practitioners such as Richard Foreman (and we might also add Robert Wilson, Societas Raffaello Sanzio and Station House Opera) who place as much emphasis on scenography as they do on text or performing bodies, have seemed to go further in replacing dramatic action by focusing solely on activity; the creative moment itself which is contingent on the individual audience member and the sense they make from the conjunction of scenographic material and performing bodies. Any sense of action in the way that Aristotle described is in work like Foreman's apparently supplied by the individual viewer (Shepherd and Wallis, 2004: 170). As Artaud points out, any attempt to translate this into language will be largely frustrated, but, I have, in this study, attempted to find ways to break open this closed circle through developing a mode of performance where the scenography and the participation of the viewer is seen to be central to the meaning-making process. This has allowed me to explore the variety of relationships between scenographic elements and performing bodies which might lead to scenographic action.

### **Bodies and scenography**

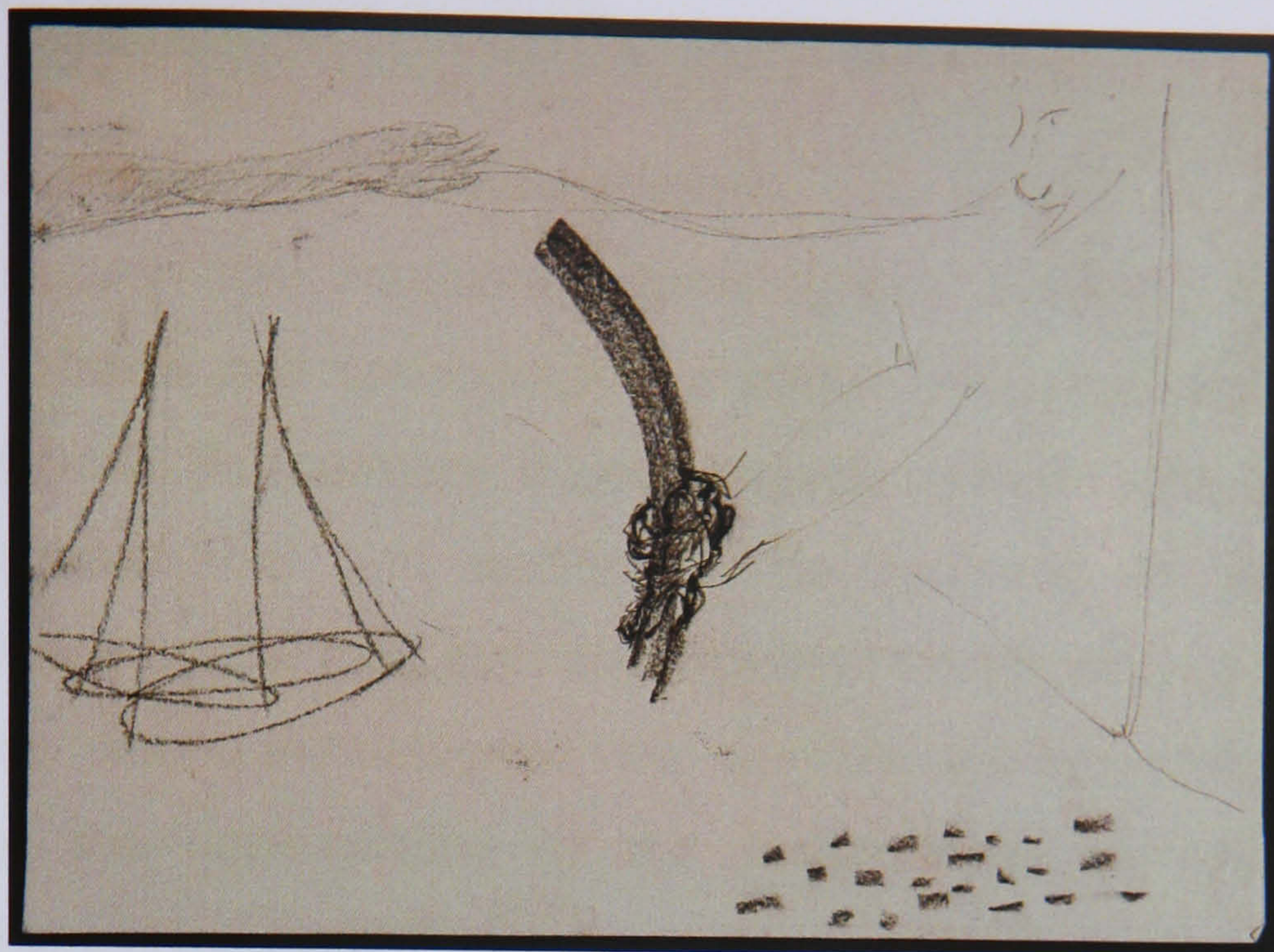
In *The General's Daughter*, the design impinged on the physical action of the performers; the narrow walkway and the deep sand needed careful negotiation, making movement deliberate and ritualistic. The space itself also responded to the physical action. The floorboards registered the sound of two sets of footsteps (stockinged feet and high heels) and imprints are left in the sand. In the scene where the girl is dressed for a wedding, the manner of the dressing combines physical



action and the properties of the material to suggest a cluster of possible meanings and what might be termed scenographic action. First the white silk itself is stretched across the stage as it is folded. The soft, billowing movement of the fabric is calming and beautifully mesmerising. But then it is wrapped around the girl as though it were a shroud until she is enveloped in the fabric, her body covered and only her eyes, through a niqab-like veil are visible. One viewer's reading was that '...controlling forces had led to the young woman passively yet complicitly into an association with extreme violence'. This comment reflects the respondent's assimilation of the elements into an account which suggests an Aristotelian sense of action. Another commented on the same scene 'I loved the cleverness of its making and enjoyed the surprise...it made me think about beauty and vulnerability'. Here the materials themselves and the manner of the visual transformation led to a similar conclusion; less clearly articulated but as powerfully felt.

The relationship between performing bodies and scenography was more complex in *Homesick*. In the opening sequence, performers' bodies are registered scenographically through their shadows on the calico as they move towards and away from light sources extending and contracting projections of their bodies. These bodies are distorted and fragmented and not easily distinguishable as individuals. They fade in and out of focus and dissolve into one another. They are accompanied by their recorded voices recounting memories of particular places, objects and people and the relationships between them. The performers bodies are distributed as scenographic material. At first it is difficult to reconcile these two elements but as phrases are repeated, the shadows can be seen as an embodiment both of the memories being described and of the memory process itself. Elsewhere, their actions operated in parallel, in symbiosis with, objects. The 'feeding mother' scene, for example, was established as much through the way a silk cloth is used as a napkin or a sheet as it is by the gestures and actions of the performers towards one another.





- A There was something fantastic about the two sheets of silk and the way they kind of vibrated together and so I've drawn that a little bit and then I decided I'd draw it tied around the head but it doesn't follow necessarily.
- Q Oh, I see, nearer the end when it's tied around her neck.
- A Yes, yes, but of course they weren't moving then so I started drawing them moving and then I thought that was rather lovely in the way they were tied around the neck, the actual smoothness of that was very good but I haven't conveyed it very well.
- Q So was it the way the image looked or the fact that it was tied?
- A I think it was the way it was tied because I think evocative but I'm not quite sure what. Maybe like a French businessman, I mean lunch with a big napkin tied or something but more than that, it's more... something very quiet, I don't know, like bed-sheets in an unfinished painting..

### *Homesick*

This comment focuses on activity, and principally on the way the fabric is manipulated in space. The possible meanings are, at this stage, provisional, and it can be seen how the action of the performance has continued into the drawing and reflection. The action of the performance is in the process of being taken up and elaborated by the participant. Images and references which are significant to this individual combine



with and extend the images and actions of the performance into what might be new scenographic material.

### **Blurring roles of designers and audience**

My work shows how traditional demarcations between the way performers' bodies and scenographic material are perceived actually overlap and blend. Furthermore, it also suggests some blurring between roles of scenographer and audience. The audience images from *Homesick* illustrate how their own scenographic imaginations are set to work and they extend the designed visio-spatial realm by projecting and transforming the scenography of the performance into significant images and spaces of their own.

In *Forest Floor*, the role of performing designers (based on the tradition of kurogo or proscenium servants) provided a concrete facilitation of this blurring. In kabuki theatre, kurogo are stage hands who act as prompters, add or remove props and assist with on-stage costume changes. They are dressed in black and convention dictates that they are invisible; facilitators rather than performers. However, Meyerhold experimented with kurogo as part of the action. *Dom Juan* (1910) included 'proscenium servants' with blacked up faces wearing extravagant livery. Their purpose was principally in 'enveloping the action in a mist redolent of the perfumed, gilded monarchy of Versailles' and they were ubiquitous, darting about the stage sprinkling perfume from crystal bottles, picking up Dom Juan's lace handkerchief, tying his shoelaces and picking up discarded cloaks and weapons. They also functioned as a distancing device, reminding the audience of the theatrical presentation. It was they who with 'tinkling silver bells' announced intervals and summoned the audience back. So they provided an environment for the action of the play in a way which included and implicated the audience. They also responded to the action, hiding under a table when the Commander's statue appears. These proscenium servants provided a link between the stage and the auditorium, reminding the audience of the essential artifice of theatre



and the role they themselves adopt in order to attend to the performance (Braun, 1995: 106). The designers in *Forest Floor* provided a guide for audience participation, encouraging them at first through simple offers (chalk to 'make a forest', silk cloth to 'make a marble hall') and gradually establishing for the audience members their freedom to improvise, embellish and intervene through scenographic gestures.

The way participants responded varied. Some felt content to copy the designers, other wanted to innovate. Some worked at the level of very personal responses whilst others were conscious of the rest of the group and their part of a potentially collective endeavour. Several were comfortable to play within the general framework of the piece, leaving things open to chance:

Speaker 9      What I found very pleasurable was the sort of clear narrative content; the sort of fairy-tale context to a lot of it...But then the really sort of not quite grasping the metaphorical images; like them being tossed on whatever it is, the sea, the snow...danger...I liked that play between a fable of something that's really quite mysterious but can't quite grasp...I mean, I chucked the top hat on that because I didn't know why I might want to do that...And I just felt curious about what it might mean to people, so I thought, oh, I'll try that then.

Q                Yes. And did it, or not?

Speaker 9      It reminded me of an expressionist movie. I couldn't quite get the reference but it did something. Again, at that sort of fabular level but I didn't quite know what it was. It was like a fable being in the mix of it....And it was really nice to have that room to play.

### **Sensuous manifolds**

Paul Crowther addresses the function of art through ecology, that is, the extent to which art serves to help us see 'our inner life reflected in, and acknowledged by, the realm of Otherness'. Crowther considers how an artwork can be figured as a 'symbolically significant sensuous manifold' which 'brings rational and sensuous material into an inseparable and mutually enhancing relation'. The integration of 'symbolic content, sensuous material and personal experience' expresses human



experience of the world in a way which reflects the 'inseparable phenomenological and logical unity of embodiment and experience itself' (Crowther, 1993: 5-7). From the account above, it is clear that this formulation can apply to scenography. Crowther emphasises the reciprocal relationship between different kinds of experience and thinking that are brought into play through art. Martin Heidegger, Crowther says, shows us that artistic representation achieves rather than reflects truth (Crowther, 1993: 99), that is, it draws attention to its very createdness so that the viewer is 'engaged by the fact that this particular disclosure of the truth is an original and unique occurrence' (Crowther, 1993: 94). In this way, the action of art extends from making it to viewing it and becomes a fulfilment of our need for self-consciousness. The viewer responds to the 'evidence of the artist's original creative vision'. Where an artwork realises its capacity to achieve truth, we recognise, empathise and imaginatively identify with the artist. We may also 'appropriate the work' as a way of developing our own identity (Crowther, 1993: 99). Furthermore, this process is creative and expressive because it is determined by the fact of us being in the world where our bodies organise and 'give structure to the phenomenal field' and by our inability to completely grasp the receding, transcending world. Our perception of the world (and of works of art within it) is 'a constant and ever-renewing process of structuration' (Crowther, 1993: 104).

The following picture and comment from *Homesick* makes a strong identification with a particular strand of the imagery in the performance and connects it to the participant's own concerns and points of reference. There is some sense of the experience as I conceived it together with an individual appropriation and re-iteration of images which are personally significant:





The whole aesthetic and impact of the piece reminded me of a short novelette about a hermaphrodite called Herculin Barbin...it felt very Victorian for me... and very much of a particular class. Very much of a particular feminine experience. And just seemed to be trapped. It seemed to be memories trapped from that era that were being just relived and repeated and repeated...

### *Homesick*

The sense of shared experience from *Homesick* is reflected in the drawings through recurring motifs that are recognisably derived from the performance. They are all rendered unique, however, by the way participants chose to re-iterate, adapt and re-imagine the work in the light of their own interests, experiences and beliefs.

### **Individual and collective images**

The ideas and feelings which I call on to make work are subject to private processes of playing, projection and aesthetic judgement, moving between alternating phases of doing and thinking. At the same time, these ideas and feelings are also drawn from a social, experiential



context which is largely shared by its audiences. Spectators are invited to attend to, to sense, experience and consider that which is being projected and, where they find some agreement or truth, take up the processes of image-making for themselves. The condition of collective viewing may influence the way images accrue value. Theatre spectators are always at some level, performing a role themselves; attending not only to the performance but participating in their own 'play of looks' (McAuley, 1999: 255). Beyond the 'inner frame' of the performance on stage, there is an 'outer frame' which includes the audience and 'contains all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event' (Bennett, 1997: 139). *The General's Daughter* conformed to this model. The less conventional spatial arrangement of *Homesick*, heightened the audience awareness of the outer frame. *Forest Floor* invited participants to move freely between these two frames and this led to instances of people performing both for themselves and for others. For some it was important to participate on their own terms, when they felt motivated and ready. This person is talking about drawing trees in their own particular style:

Q                   What did you draw?

Speaker 11       It was still a tree but it was a pine tree the way I would normally do it. And that was felt very good and I did it totally differently. And also that I could be part of a different stage, not when I was expected to do it, but things were going on and then I just did my own little thing. And I also had the feeling of widening the space really. And that happened that I kept drawing the trees and then the space moved further out and out and that felt really good.

Q                   Why do you think it felt good, do you know?

Speaker 11       I did feel like participating at that point. Well I couldn't quite switch off my analytic mind. I felt I was both a spectator and a critic at the same time there. So I knew what I was doing, that I am actually widening the space here and I am therefore contributing to what's happening. But it's exactly because of that that it did feel very good. And also it wasn't quite noticeable so I was like, 'I'm doing my little thing but it does actually add up somehow'.

*Forest Floor*



The speaker is pleased to note that what they were doing as an individual made a difference to the whole. Others found themselves wholly caught up with the objects:

...when I was doing something with an object I wasn't thinking about anything else...it was that thing and then I would step back and look. My favourite bit was doing the puppets because I just became oblivious to what everyone else was doing

### *Forest Floor*

Many people found themselves moving between becoming involved and then stepping back to reflect on the way the whole performance was developing:

Speaker 4      Which I think was interesting because I actually did a couple of times because I wanted to take up the chance to actually step out of it.

Q                So what did you do then? Did you step out and where did you go?

Speaker 4      I just stepped over a little bit further back and leaned against the wall. And then I moved much further back because I didn't want to be a part at that time, at that moment. And I think that was also an attempt for me to gain some ownership. And I think, interestingly, a different ending could well have been found had we achieved a greater sense of ownership because then we are allowed to finish something.

### *Forest Floor*

Meaningful exchanges between people were effected through images in several ways. There was a sense of collective endeavour reflected in the way the space changed through the performance:

Coming back to the floor and ... the images remaining, it's the same as happened with ... the action we saw. Because it started off with a sort of pristine, abstracted thing and then gradually things gathered on top of it. You can't forget each time you go through the story the things that accrue. In the same way, the floor sort of reflected that. It showed all the different stages that we had gone through.

### *Forest Floor*

There were also significant moments of exchange between two people through the medium of objects. One of the designers recalled that:



Designer ...there was a guy that had his puppet in his headlamp and I still remember that because it was just really nice and I went and worked with him and another puppet and then went in the snow, it was just like a really personal moment...The two of us connected, nobody else.

Q In combining together to make this image?

Designer And it was really equal and that was a really nice moment that we shared. And then I may not have that again for the rest of the performance with anyone else.

### *Forest Floor*

The performers and the designers found *Forest Floor* a very challenging exercise. It placed responsibility on them to respond creatively, in the moment, to suggestions and interventions from the audience. However by the third or fourth performance, they were starting to feel more comfortable with the shift of roles and the move from performing to image making:

...today I just didn't see myself as a performer, because everyone else was taking on the roles as a performer as well, and I know it was all about the image, so it became a totally different experience for me... I'm looking at things in a totally different way now, whereas performance stuff that is very physical, kind of high energy, sweaty type of stuff, I constantly feel as though I need to be kind of doing things with my body so I am the centre of attention, but this was kind of taking me out of the equation, it's about a bigger picture, it's about image.

### *Forest Floor*

The notion of scenographic exchange which was prompted by the audience images from *Homesick* finally seemed to find some real concrete manifestation in the final performance of *Forest Floor* at Hull. The whole space was activated by individuals and small groups playing with the material constructing images, watching other people's images, creating new possibilities. A participant remarked:

... it was like jazz, you know, instead of being a scored piece of music it was like jazz and we all had the beat, we all knew we were playing in 6/8 time but the saxophone was doing its thing and the trombone was doing its thing and overall it was coherent, but you weren't necessarily doing any more than just listening to the underlying rhythm.

### *Forest Floor*



Like jazz, there was a responsive and improvisatory nature to the performance. What was lacking, though, was time to develop more inventive, imaginative images and the space to stand back and see what we had made. The scale of the scenographic elements, designed to be accessible to participants, tended to encourage small and local images. This made grander more arresting gestures difficult and it also militated against group attention and moments of contemplation or reflection.

### **Ethics and exchange**

Alan Read's examination of the ethics of theatre contains some interesting parallels with Crowther in respect of the notion of the ecology of art. Good theatre is that which 'enables us to know the everyday in order to better live everyday life' (Read, 1993: 1) and achieves this through 'the medium of images to convey feeling and meaning' (1993: 5). Like Crowther, Read also suggests that this is an ongoing process, a building of 'constituencies' (1993: 5). However, theatre is unlike other forms of art as the engagement between audience and performance is metaphysical; 'the image between the performer and the audience adds up to more than the sum of its various parts' (1993: 58). In a similar vein, Sauter draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's ideas about play where 'the player/performer is connected with the observer/spectator'. The nature of play is such that recognition on the part of the observer/spectator may exceed understanding of the player/performer who is often too deeply situated within the activity and lacks sufficient distance to interpret as well as play. 'The artists' intention is beyond their control, and the performance becomes open to interpretation' (Sauter, 2000: 28). My viewing of the audience images from *Homesick* gave me a new perspective on what I thought I had made. I was able to see how the original images multiply and mutate, modifying my view of my own work, sharpening my own sense of self and becoming available to be folded back into subsequent work.



This model of exchange privileges neither the original work, nor the response of the spectator and it relies on the 'horizon of the understanding subject and the position of the object', that is, the context of the specific time, place and constituency of the performance and its audience which is crucial to successful communication (Sauter, 2000: 29). Read goes further and describes theatre images as a transaction and part of 'an economy of symbolic exchange' (Read, 1993: 63). This implies that images are taken up and developed when they are seen to have currency which connects us not only to our own sense of self but to a wider, ethical concern of the individual's position in relation to society.

Both ethics and theatre are concerned with possibility. On the contrary representation is the reflection of an 'existing' proposition as though it were fact, and this is never what theatre achieves. The theatre image unlike any other is always a possibility without closure, like the ethical relation which awaits creation (Read, 1993: 90)

Proposals about the relationships between people, between individuals and the larger community, between human beings and the world are put forward in the 'disconcerting and unpredictable' images of theatre which oscillate between 'the material and the metaphysical' (Read, 1993: 62). The sensuous manifold of scenography creates a site for exchange where the process of experiencing scenography becomes a mutual, creative construction and a communal, even collaborative, act of image creation containing multiple refractions and perspectives.



# Conclusions

I will now address the research questions in the light of my analysis and summarise the implications of my research for scenographic theory and practice.

## **1. What aspects of scenographic images do audiences engage with and respond to?**

The dominant association with the term 'image' is usually allied with semiotic understandings, as something to be read, as a signifier which yields certain signifieds. But this research has shown that the scenographic image also embraces a phenomenological encounter with and implication in volume, texture and environment. States likens 'image' to the 'disease' caught by the imagination of the viewer and the 'sign' to the 'germ' or cause (States, 1985: 24), however, the notion of image in my research has extended even beyond that which is seen to include the image which is formed between the stage and the audience in the imagination of the individual spectator.

Scenographic material has qualities which are set apart from the other aspects of the stage (the text, the performers) and has much in common with painting and sculpture. Viewers respond to colour, texture and line in separate objects and also attend to the compositional relation between them. Spatial relationships (height, depth, distance, scale) between scenographic objects or their compositional relationships (contrast, juxtaposition, harmony) act to engage the viewer's attention.

The interruption of attention (through distraction or moments of punctum) and the way scenographic images develop over the duration of a performance also suggest that time is a constituent part of the scenographic image which is engaged with.



What has emerged as an important point of investigation is the way scenographic materials interact with performing bodies so that bodies might, at times, be seen principally as part of the scenographic image. Set and costume and light might frame or constrain physical action, extend, fragment or obliterate the body. Objects and materials, traditionally accorded a subordinate role as props, might take on a more poetic role in relation to performing bodies, offering an interaction or dialogue between human and responsive object. Although we may want to point to the ways that scenographic materials have distinct qualities which are like painting and sculpture, distinguishing between the scenic space and the performing bodies in terms of the audience experience of perception overlooks the phenomenal and subjective aspects of scenography which have increasingly become a focus for my work. And even when scenography is only viewed from a distance, spectators respond to somatosensory aspects alongside the visual.

## **2. What different kinds of sense do audience members make of scenographic images and what levels of significance are attributed to them?**

Cognitive sense can be made of scenographic images, particularly where spectators assume the role of decoding the production. But even in the tidiest accounts of my scenography (*The General's Daughter*) most respondents reflect the polysemous and complex nature of visual signs.

Scenographic materials may in themselves carry meaning, independently from the performers, although a scenographic image may subsume the performers from time to time. At these points, Barthes' 'obtuse' meaning (Barthes, 1977: 61), which requires a poetical rather than an intellectual grasp, might take hold, leaving an unresolved but productive tension for the viewer.



Often details of the composition spark new points of reference, often linked to the spectators' subjective feelings and their private experiences from the past.

Also the multi-sensory aspects of scenography may lead to a phenomenological encounter stimulating embodied understandings of the physical and material world. These sensations are often registered through impressions and fragments rather than in fully-formed images.

Shifts in attention and lapses into distraction form a key part of the meaning-making process. Scenography can easily manipulate the viewer's attention but audience members are also capable of making their own choices about what to focus on. Disruption and surprise in the scenographic composition help to instigate critical distance. Distraction, as the result of prolonged attention, meanwhile, might induce a productive reverie where spectators are open to associations which are significant to them alone.

### **3. In what ways are the scenographer's original intentions and references apprehended by audiences?**

The contract that Barthes describes between creators and consumers as *studium* was formulated for viewing photographs, but something of the diligent encounter with the creator's intentions that it evokes has been a feature of audience responses to my work. This is perhaps inevitable given the nature of the performances and the associated activities and the constituencies of the audiences.

What I have found enlightening is not how far my original intentions have been recognised by audiences, but how these intentions have been extended and re-interpreted by the audience. The concept of projection as a means of proposing ideas has come to be a useful model in thinking about how scenography communicates simultaneously through concrete and conceptual means.



The notion of scenographic exchange found a tangible outcome in the drawings of the *Homesick* audience where they expanded the visio-spatial realm I had designed by projecting and transforming the scenography of the performance into significant images and spaces of their own. Through this research, I found myself in the privileged position of being able to see how the original images multiply and mutate, returning to be folded back into my subsequent work. This was tested in *Forest Floor* where participants responded within the performance to the scenographic gestures that I had initiated and developed with a larger team of designers and performers and worked with other participants to create a place of exchange and a proliferating network of images.

#### **4. How subjective is the appreciation of scenographic imagery?**

A psychological account of the artwork as articulated by Lacan and Foster might help us understand the intensely subjective motivations behind the creation and viewing of images. The scenographic image becomes a screen through which we can tame and moderate the gaze of the world in order to maintain our fragile sense of ourselves. The motivation for making and viewing images is part of our need to 'develop a healthy reciprocity between the embodied subject and its world' so that the subject might find 'its own sense of self defined and realized' (Crowther, 1993: 5).

The idea of scenographic punctum similarly turns on a subjective response, although Barthes appears to reverse the logic of the Lacanian screen. Punctum is the moment of breakthrough, the rupture in the smooth surface of carefully controlled composition which can touch the individual viewer.

However, there is a dialectic between subjective and wider cultural sensibilities. In a performance, individuals are also part of a collective and their responses to scenographic images are shaped by shared



cultural understandings as well as their subjective perspective. It is this tension which points to the ethical dimension of the operation of scenography.

### **5. How far can audiences be seen as co-creators of scenographic images?**

The formulation of the scenographic exchange depends on spatial thinking where perceived, conceived and actual experiences interpenetrate one another. In the 'non-verbal symbols and signs' of representational spaces (Lefebvre, 1991: 39), projections and exchanges through the medium of art lead to new perspectives on the world. Scenographic space will inevitably draw on and make representations of the world as perceived and conceived, but it also operates as actual space operating through spatial means where our sensing bodies are at the centre. In this respect, the act of viewing and making sense of scenography is an act of co-creation in that it may require the synthesis of the concrete and conceptual. The *Homesick* images demonstrate this very well. Responding to bodily sensations and cognitive reflection, each creates something unique which is inflected by their own sense of self. In this, they act like scenographers.

*Forest Floor* offered the possibility of audience becoming scenographers for the duration of the performance. And there were moments where this offer was taken up. When a participant used her head-torch to light up one of the silk tubes, the image immediately gained some currency and spontaneously the rest of the group did the same, re-imagining and modifying the space in an extraordinarily unifying image. But most of the time the potential scenographies were more modest with individuals and small groups trying out the materials to see what came of it. Many participants reported individual moments of insight. Some of these were shared. From time to time these smaller endeavours would gather a larger interest; in the videos of the performances (see DVD) you can see a sequence where a visual narrative of puppets negotiating a dangerous river is developed. Often



moments of scenographic or theatrical impact were hard to register because constant activity gave few opportunities for contemplation or reflection.

But what was achieved, I think, is that participants were offered a spatial encounter where they were able to play and exchange ideas through the medium of space, light, costumes and objects. The 'jazz' analogy which arose from the final performance showed that it is possible to explore the scenographic materials and their properties and their possible significance through play. This gives some sense of the way scenographic ideas might be generated and improvised.

Ultimately, the 'material and metaphysical' of theatre images which constitutes an 'economy of symbolic exchange' (Read 1993: 62-63) needs to be founded on a more purposeful and ethical base. Audience can be said to be co-creators of scenography in as far as it is they who find potential stimulation or agreement in an image and or complete it through projection and appropriation as part of the process of ongoing structuration (Crowther, 1993: 104). In the context of performance, where the shared experience of images heightens this constant negotiation between ourselves and the world, scenography offers itself as a medium of symbolic and sensuous exchange.

### **Implications of this research**

This research suggests that a heightened awareness and theoretical understanding of the ways in which scenography can communicate to its audiences would benefit both scenographic pedagogy and practice through offering new concepts which help to articulate the operation of scenography. This might lead to a more ambitious, more diverse range of scenographic practices both within and beyond traditional performance contexts.

Systematic attention to the phenomenological experience and embodied understanding of scenography would lead to a better



appreciation of the intersection between performing bodies and scenography to the benefit of the wider field of theatre and performance. Meanwhile, concepts of spatial thinking, projection and sensuous manifolds, provide new ways to conceptualise not only scenography, but all theatrical and performative encounters.

This research has also suggested a new form of participatory scenographic performance which offers a collective experience of exchange through images and re-examines the roles of designers, performers and audience. This needs to be developed further, but it might offer new departures in the potential of scenography as a vehicle for generating feeling and meaning and an expanded view of the creative implication of audiences.



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