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## THE EMPTY PLACE

I am sitting in our studio theatre in Swansea. The words studio and theatre are often put together to imply both a degree of comfort and a separation of audience and performance, but here these words must be understood loosely. This is the Bunker. Approximately 20m x 15m with a 3.5m ceiling, paint peels off the ceiling and the remains of blue and yellow tiling can be seen upon two of the walls. There is a raised concrete platform taking up nearly half the space and on one of the walls a great assemblage of electrical units. This was the cold storage room of Iceland, the heart of the frozen food empire when this space served as the stockroom for the hungry shoppers who would scan the chest freezers in the public spaces beyond.

Like so many High Streets within the UK and elsewhere, the frozen food specialists moved on and this building lay empty for many years. It is now owned by a housing association – the human face, one might, say of re-development – and one can expect that the future lies with residential units above and exciting commercial opportunities below. But for now it is still the Bunker Theatre, home of Volcano. With the lockdown still in place, no one has been here for close on three months. I am sitting on a mole's breath brown sofa donated by a prison officer who said he liked art. There's a pile of old books at one end of the sofa. I spot a bunch of suitcases heaped up in a corner, costumes scattered over wooden benches – it looks like this place was left in a mess and in a rush. I am trying to remember what we were doing – it might have been the youth theatre, or it could have been The Mighty New, our kids' group. I cannot quite recall. I wonder whether I can hear the speakers buzzing.

One of the books on the sofa is Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*, written in 1968. He could hardly have imagined that the title of his book would now perfectly describe not the activities but the actualities of all theatres within the

UK. We might have an active digital presence across all sorts of platforms but our studios, our stages, are empty. Brook's text argues, as is well known, that theatre neglects its sacred and pre-modern origins at its peril. It is a beautiful argument that got somehow left behind in the subsequent decades of consumption in which theatre developed as an ever more sophisticated cultural commodity.

These thoughts drift into my head as I sit looking at the ghosts within this space. Everywhere I see memories layered upon memories, and when I cross the space to look at what looks like a scarf I feel as if I am moving in a ghost-like fashion, invisible to myself and others. Theatre and dance – the most ephemeral of arts – seem to have prefigured our own erasure. Brook was right to draw attention to the way in which the audience sometimes disappeared as a consequence of the lighting, the set or the scale of the theatre itself. But now it seems as if the reorientation in the scale of performance that Brook's book implied might be an additional consequence of Covid-19.

Theatre makers have always had to negotiate with the price of property – we are ever ready to join the reserve army of the unemployed as developers require ever higher prices for urban square metres. To survive, theatre needs its partners to take a broader view of the costs of economic growth. Cities need cultural spaces that are flexible and responsive and multi-functional. If a City is anything at all it surely is a meeting point – a space sometimes empty but then full of conviviality, however that is expressed. It is in the meetings and in the exchange of stories that a city fulfils its promise of ease and welcome. It follows that we need empty spaces, spaces that can transform and offer fluid identities and excitements to our nimble and not so nimble populations.

Whilst I sit in this dilapidated palace of dreams wondering how we will reopen safely, relevantly and beautifully, I am aware that a short distance away a large construction site has been busy during the whole of lockdown. Buckingham Group developments have been creating a digital arena, five minutes from

where I sit. It is a £135M investment in which we are told that we will have the opportunity to 'play, work, live and explore'. The development appears to be going at breakneck speed since the lockdown and I hope that the contractors, who are primarily working outside, have had their safety concerns met. I wonder whether they have any doubts as to what they are doing as their cranes bolt together a huge skeleton of steel. Perhaps they joked about whether they should put the roof on. Did they wonder whether it might be more suitable, in the present environment, if it remained open to the elements? Perhaps the developers knew that not 50 metres away from the site there used to be a faux-Roman amphitheatre. History repeating itself... Of course, we need development within this strange little city. The question really is whether the public will, in sufficient numbers, want to 'explore' the arena in close proximity to one another. The Grand Theatre, which is just across the road and seats 1000 people in its wonderful old auditorium, will be able to advise. The future is happening although whether it is our future or a future that we will have to negotiate and fit into is the issue. The unevenness of development is always in evidence in a city like Swansea, divided as it is upon such a dramatic geographic axis.

Theatres can bring us together, but they can also be places that seem exclusive, unwelcoming and not quite for us. I wish the Digital Arena well. I hope its visionary design will catapult us into a new future of participation, equality and appreciation of the expressive arts. It might also bring us together by encouraging a new sense of confident citizenship. Beyond this optimism, it seems unlikely that the new arena will be presenting a restaging of the Mahabharata or the Mabinogion. Scale is necessary, but a City needs many smaller spaces for a culture to flourish. These smaller spaces are the earthworks of citizenship and democracy. They are where we learn the language of performance and participation. We can fall in love in these small spaces with all kinds of performances but we are unlikely to fall for a spectacle of obedience and authority. A citizenship armed with the capacity for critical

thinking is what a successful democratic city needs. Whether it is at Volcano or at Clwyd, in Cardiff or Formentera, in Berlin or Brazil there are spaces that are zinging with the memories of past performances and dynamic, critical futures. They come into my mind and I look forward to returning to them.

But for the moment I am in the Bunker Theatre, once a department store, then an Iceland frozen food outlet and now an empty performance space. I try to think of a performance that might take place in the here in a couple of months. It will be small - I think the audience will probably move through this cavernous building 'discovering' performers along the way. But what will be said and how will it be received? Who will come into the City for the non-essential goods of performance? Is it a good confusion that goods can be good and not good? Is the good life the same as a life spent pursuing an expanding range of commodities? Why should performance be considered a non-essential good, but not coffee and cake? I don't know the answer to these questions, but I do know that the extraordinary time that we are living in requires some kind of analysis, echo, cry or song back from performance. As if these stationary times now impel us to a new consciousness of discontent, to a new feeling of what may not yet be born within us. The not-yetness of a better way of being together. If now is a more sensitive future, we might re-value the public space and occupy it in a way that will help restore our civic, democratic institutions.

Drowsy with these thoughts that might smack of near-forgotten scholars, I realise that I am falling asleep and that across the way there is a tiny blue light shining to the left of me and I see that within this empty space the sound system is still on – the speakers sending a disjointed electrical signal to and from the artists upstairs and the alcoholics outside and anyone else who will listen, that hope and deceit travel in the same train, or plane, or car. I get up and walk over to the sound board and switch it off. I say to myself that in a society as unequal as ours there will be no difficulty in developing a consciousness of discontent. But these are lines from a play or a book or a

poem and what we need is action – a vaccine, a five-year lease, redistribution, and a better way of living.

Even in July the air is still cold in this studio, returning perhaps to its frozen origins – but inviting us in nonetheless – asking us to think about what it is we want to say when we come back and who can stand in this space and make us believe that we have been in this together and we might happily rub shoulders again.

**PAUL DAVIES**  
Artistic Director  
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