Physical Theatre: History, Process and Development

Definitions
For fifteen years, Volcano has been making theatre work that has generally been described as physical theatre. We ourselves have paid little attention to what 'physical theatre' might actually mean. This refusal to engage in the business of definition may have been unfortunate. Nature abhors a vacuum. Academics and arts councils can, and often do, tell us theatre practitioners what they mean and want by and from physical theatre. What follows is merely a sketch, from one point of view, of what is called physical theatre and its subsequent development. By the term 'physical theatre', I mean theatre and theatre makers that view the text as one component part in the making of a piece of theatre. Hang on, I can hear you say, this kind of definition is so wide as to be entirely unhelpful. Well, we could supplement it with the following: an emphasis on choreography, film, video and music, live or recorded, will often prove to be of equal significance to any text that may play a part in the performance. Again it might be countered that not so much is being claimed here - nothing much that a 'mainhouse' production of The Threepenny Opera and a regional pantomime couldn’t subscribe to - you could say that we are all physical theatre types now! It is clear there are obvious difficulties with an attempt to provide a clear, meaningful, all-embracing, or even helpful definition of physical theatre. Perhaps this is why we hear that physical theatre is really about the re-invigoration of theatre practice - and (occasionally) the practice or experience of the audience. Indeed, the proponents of physical theatre are invariably said to have some especial relationship with the younger theatre going public. That may be the case. From the perspective of Volcano and our work here in Wales and further afield these attempts at "definition" require further refinement.

History
The physical theatre that we were making fifteen years ago, whilst embracing movement and visual design, (Tony Harrison's V, Medea: SexWar and Jonathan Moore's Street Captives are examples) was also, crucially, a certain kind of political intervention. The kind of politics often varied. So much depended upon the company. Our early work, whilst aligned with a certain kind of feminism in performance, also promoted a peculiar breed of what I call anarchic nihilism. Class and sexual politics were the primary modes of experience and presentation. In one sense the issue was simply one of equality. In another sense there was an impatience and urgency about this work that bordered on the reckless. I shall, now very briefly, discuss three of these early performances in an effort to provide a context for the contemporary work of the company.
Jonathan Moore's Street Captives was a straightforward piece about urban alienation in the context of the rapid social changes wrought by the first phases of Thatcherism. A wine bar owner out for a quiet day of fishing is tormented by two thugs. Before killing him, they torture him with the particular language and humour of their tribe. Two points are worth mentioning. Firstly, one of the thugs was played, as a matter of course, by a woman, and secondly Street Captaves, whilst real and absurd in many respects, refused the currency of Beckett (and Albee). There was no existential drama here. Freedom and choice were never in question. This was the realm of necessity. This was a social drama (and murder) that was etched on the conscience as class action and will. In short, a different kind freedom was being asserted.

We extended these ideas of conflicting expressions of freedom and loyalty in Tony Harrisons poem V. This poem was a state-of-the-nation cri de coeur, a poet's emphatic refusal and inability to comprehend the “other” - in this case the brutality and casual violence of the inner city. Volcano's performance in tutus and Westwood-style jackets with Christ's image on the reverse redoubled this sense of otherness. These performers came from places you hadn’t been and didn’t want to go! There was something genuinely mysterious about the level of energy and anger that was presented on stage.

In Medea:SexWar we tried to retain this sense of the dangerous ‘other’: the origins and purpose of this otherness were now sexual rather than class-based. In addition, we sought to rupture the drama by adding a very different text to Harrison's original opera score. We had two objectives. The first was to break the sense of telos that runs so inevitably through the Greek tragedies (we found ourselves doing much the same thing nearly 10 years later when we coupled the terrible crimes of Fred and Rose West with Shakespeare's Macbeth). Our second objective was to suggest that the problem of Medea could now be put in a more stark and chilling fashion. Kill your children or follow Solanas's manifesto recommendation in SCUM - practice violence on men before they practice it on you.

Anarchic nihilism could occasionally be prescriptive. The point was that it was engaged. I see these works as a kind of primitive, urban theatre practice. I suppose they were our early attempts at physical theatre. We shall, in a moment, say more about the various strands that make up what we now call physical theatre. What I am trying to establish in this section is a certain kind of political inheritance or debt to the past. Of course this inheritance or debt has had to negotiate the long, bleak years of Conservative rule as well as the euphoria of Tony Blair's managed capitalism. In politics we learn that disenchantment is never far from the door.

**Wales and Authenticity**

Before disenchantment, physical theatre (or at least the Welsh variety that I represent) interacted with a number of forces that were particular to South Wales: a fully charged political environment; a mature experimental theatre practice; a vibrant community theatre tradition and a slender visual theatre practice. To this dynamic young culture Volcano added what I have called a primitive urban theatre practice founded on the authenticity of the body. Authenticity was, and still is, a key component of our theatre practice. As an idea, it is closely related to attempts to solve, or move beyond, the debate about ideology. Thus, it might be claimed that the body as authentic in time and space does not speak or move in ways that might be interpreted as ideological. The body was beyond context: it was context. The authentic body reopened the dream of unlimited freedom: not freedom from (tyranny) but freedom to express the multifaceted nature of human possibilities. The politics of identity derives much of its force from the idea of authenticity. Volcano's position on the western edge of Wales and the United Kingdom meant that there was a certain kind of marginality to our identity. This much we enjoyed. At an odd angle to the universe we could perform even very well known texts like Under Milk Wood and Macbeth in different, new, and hopefully authentic ways.

The authentic body also had implications for the processes of theatre production themselves. In the case of Volcano, it meant an attempt to rid ourselves of the ancient division of labour between directors/actors/choleographers and characters. We were creating what we would now call a flat organisation. Perhaps it was hardly surprising that when we came to perform (The Communist) Manifesto, we found room for Mayakovsky's poem 'A Cloud in Trousers', the opening lines of which are: 'Who am I? I am a man of no class, no nation' . This brand of peasant authenticity might seem akin to a search for psychological truth or realism, but it is not. Character was not reached by searching for psychological depth; hermetic analysis could not help. The rehearsal process demanded the exhaustion of the resources of selfhood. This was physically and mentally demanding. Destruction and creation were, in our minds and our practice, intimately linked. Within the rehearsal room, you had to blow something up - perhaps yourself - before you might find a fragment or shard of something from which you might begin to create.
The fate of Wales’s largely autonomous, plural theatre practices is (as they say) history (and a satisfactory record of these historical opportunities has yet to be made). I mention these details in an attempt to provide additional context within which to discuss the current development of Volcano’s work; not to provide further evidence of the propensity of the Welsh to gnaw at the calcified bones of the past. History: calcified, recent, or otherwise was one partner to these developments - authenticity was the other. Unfortunately, the collapse of modernity has made appeals to authenticity seem naïve and insufficiently “articulated”. And it is true the gendarmes of post-modern theory once patrolled the infinitely elastic borders of the text with the kind of rigour that we associated with comrade Althusser. But these same border guards have got tired: £4.50 an hour was never enough. People smuggling stories of a narrative and non-narrative sort have been known to succeed in the new millennium of the post-textual world. Within the worlds of theatre it cannot be said that post-narrative or non-narrative experimental practice has flourished. State pruning and a general shift within the culture away from the citizen as critic and towards the citizen as consumer have all played their part - other theatre practices, however, have been known to take root, grow, gain confidence, and take their place in the sunshine.

**Contemporary Physical Theatre**

Physical theatre is one such practice: it is a fairly rare plant and difficult to grow in this soil. It will never be bought in garden-centre proportions; nevertheless it is known and canvassed by most of the experts. Contemporarily the genus PT (as it is widely known) divides depending upon the quantity of the language. At one end of the spectrum there would be dance-based physical theatre, exemplified by the work of DV8. The early work of this company contributed to the definition of physical theatre and established new parameters for what was possible with the politicised body. In addition to DV8 there may be circus-based or visual physical theatre, where very little language (or dance) is utilised. These shows are often visual: they may make a stunning contribution to a particular scene, but, as in the case of Mamaloucos’ production of *The Birds* at The National, may fall a little flat when substance or content is required. This species often relies on a mimetic methodology, locating tragedy as a kind of comic ontology of the human condition. Success, however, is possible. The company Theatre O’s Lecoq-inspired *Three Dark Tales* was a major hit in Edinburgh two years ago and has travelled the world since.

The second variant of the strain would be what I call the physical theatre story. Here movement is an inspiration: however, at the same time, the text is often in evidence - indeed words may well provide the very basis of the life form itself. Recent examples would be *Peepshow* and *Underworld* by Frantic Assembly and, less recently, *Moments of Madness* by Volcano. These productions may court either popularity or distance, but risk offending both critics and enthusiasts as they may fail to strike a satisfactory balance between movement and text. In other words the physical theatre story may oscillate between, what some people see as, experimental obscurity and the prosaic, well-made play or dance theatre piece.

An attempt to remedy these deficiencies is made by the more self-consciously experimental show. Here film, live art and physical theatre often to combine to create a piece less reliant on the text or movement quality. The work of Stan’s Café, Third Angel and Eddie Ladd is relevant here. Here ironic simulation often stands in for representation. This trade-off is frequently innovative and stimulating. The question of whether this work is sufficiently accessible or physical may be considered significant; on the other hand the quality of these performances may forestall these obvious objections.

The final possibility for the plant known as physical theatre is what is known in the business as plantation, design and deconstruction. This hybrid is not necessarily my preference, but it is certainly something my company has specialised in for a number of years. We have deconstructed the Communism plant (some would say weed) in *Manifesto*. Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* and *Macbeth* both received post-Elizabethan treatment. We have tried our hand at the Norwegian shrub Ibsen in *How to Live*, and most recently we have pruned and re-planted that quintessential English gardener’s favourite rose, *Private Lives* by Noël Coward. We have done a fair bit of this physical theatre as design and deconstruction and it is probably true to say that as specialists in this field we have created something like a niche in the market. ‘Segmentation’, I think, is the word they use.

Lately, however, we have begun to diversify. We have wandered (some would say far) from the path of design and deconstruction. In part, we have done this as a consequence of looking backwards, perhaps with a hint of nostalgia, to our earlier attempts to use physical theatre to authenticate our experience. Also, as landscape gardeners of some repute, we can be bloody-minded; and if we can still surprise and delight our fellow gardeners, clients and friends by being off the map and over the wall, we will. The third reason we
have begun to diversify is perhaps more a consequence of our belief that the garden that is physical theatre may be in danger of fulfilling too many of the popular fancies and follies that abound within the flower shows at Chelsea and elsewhere.

In other words, some digging is needed. Flowers are fine and so is the movement of the eyes and senses when arranging and regarding them but right now it is time to pick up the spade, time to get our hands dirty again. We need our expectations confounded again, muddied up. We need to roll around in the muck of the unexpected, to grunt at Socrates and his followers and tell them we were never that happy. To this end, we have been engaging in something of an experiment - I admit it. This is what this journey around the margins of horticulture has really been all about - a confession. First with TalkSexShow and now with This Imaginary Woman, Volcano is trying to extend its work beyond the landscapes of design and deconstruction.

New Developments, New Processes
In this article I have connected Volcano's early theatre practice with the twin vectors of class and sexual politics. Physical theatre, or what has become known as physical theatre, was in its infancy. As the culture and the political context changed, physical theatre developed more sophisticated connections to other art forms and other theatre practices. Finally, I suggested that our own work centred on the destruction and re-presentation of works that may or may not have occupied various central or marginal positions within different literary, political and cultural traditions. Whilst not abandoning this area of work, we are now simultaneously developing a new body of work that requires a different process of production and a different performance style.

The developments that I sketch out in this section were not, in the first instance, consciously planned. They had more of the character of Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling' - although in this case it was our feeling that the structure needed shifting, if not changing. (The structure is in fact ossifying around a series of predictable, set piece alternatives.) The first point to make is that these changes in emphasis were made in collaboration with other artists. This was, and is, vital to the work of Volcano. Making new connections across art forms and across cultures is central to the development of vision and practice. This Imaginary Woman and TalkSexShow both sought to make new connections across art forms, particularly with regard to the process of production.

Secondly, and more significantly for our purposes, I want to talk about what I call new, new writing. Much, quite rightly, has been made of the contribution new writing may make to the growth and development of a culture. This must be obvious - however if in the case of theatre the writing remains within the confines of character, plot and play that are already established conventions, the finished product is unlikely to extend our appreciation of the possibilities of theatre. New new writing in one very obvious sense merely returns us to the writer-actor tradition. It seeks to abolish the division of labour and distance between the writer and the performers. Performance companies like Volcano are generally perceived as working with, on, or against known texts. The process of deconstruction is the methodology at the heart of the performance. If this is not the case, performance methodology centres on devising material in the rehearsal process. New new writing establishes a performance methodology via a script that is prepared by one of the performers within the company and provides the basis for the rehearsal and performance. This process is subtly different from a devised methodology. It can accommodate a shorter rehearsal period and the suzerainty of the author. More positively, it encourages structured freedom, criticism and expression. A script developed in this fashion can really embrace a shift in theatre form rather than merely accommodate it. Much very fine (old) new writing seems to me dragged back by theatre conventions that the writing itself has long since discarded. If new, new writing establishes a different relationship between the writer and the performer it also, in Volcano's case, repositions the director. Thus the director is invited to join a project which is already considerably advanced in shape and form. The director is as much a guest discovering the text as are the performers and writer themselves.

This is not a romantic fiction. In TalkSexShow we were all aware in rehearsal that there was a second text, intimated by the script, that could only be discovered in performance. Similarly in This Imaginary Woman, we are discovering that beyond the poetry of the voice and the rhythm of the music there is something else to be discovered - suggested by the script but discoverable only in performance. The 'not-yet' quality of our latest rehearsals is, I believe, a new development. It demonstrates both a utopian mode of exploration (always good in rehearsals) and the manner in which the writer-performer occupies a critical position within this new process. Thus the 'not-yet' nature of the play is (ghost) written into the rehearsal script. The unknown nature of the play itself is acknowledged by author, performers and director. The 'open' scripts of
*TalkSexShow* and *This Imaginary Woman* mean that, in their different ways, these productions are inevitably concerned with the form of theatre performance. They borrow, quite obviously, and (I hope) quite diligently from other modes of expressions and experience - the lecture, the television chat show and the cabaret and music experience.

With these two new shows we wanted to stretch the contemporary definitions of physical theatre: to move, perhaps, into territory that is unexpected and uncomfortable. In *This Imaginary Woman* an intimate confession may serve as a requiem both for a woman's life and for a mode of experience that is near exhaustion and disappearance now. In the case of *TalkSexShow* we wanted to present almost the opposite of *This Imaginary Woman*: an imaginary man dedicated to a manifesto of sexual and spiritual restoration, a manifesto that continually threatens the proprietorial division that remains between audience and action/actors.

*This Imaginary Woman* and *TalkSexShow* inhabit a kind of excessive aesthetic - the one of intimacy, the other of publicity. The one performance attempts to retrieve the sphere of the personal and the authentic, the other revels in the colonising ambitions of the space of the social. There is a histrionic aspect to these performances. Neither show is constructed around the playful possibilities of ironic simulation. *TalkSexShow* and *This Imaginary Woman* may be the reverse side of Volcano's earlier nihilism. Once again there is affirmation and authenticity but it is not found in the body, it is found in the text. And what the text says is possibly unknown, probably surprising, and certainly uncomfortable.

In this paper, I have tried to chart a brief history of where I see Volcano's place within the genre that is Physical Theatre. Obviously, this has been done in a sweeping and, some may think, cavalier fashion. My intentions have not been either wholly prescriptive or historical. I have been drawn back to our early work in an effort to provide a context for where we are now. In an effort to answer Bruce Chatwin's question, 'What am I (or we) doing here?' We are making theatre - different theatre from that which we made before. How different this is, or where it is leading, may not be questions that we can now answer. But certainly we can say that it is time to pull out the compass, put on the boots and move

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