

“SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE EXISTS WITHIN A PLETHORA OF PHENOMENA, ALL COMPETING FOR ATTENTION, ALL POTENTIALLY MEANINGFUL: A CONCATENATION OF THAT AT SITE AND THAT BROUGHT *TO* THE SITE”

(PEARSON, 2010, P.1)

THE RECIPROCAL PROCESS OF THE SITE AND THE SUBJECT IN DEVISING SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE

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A thesis submitted to the
University of Birmingham
for the degree of
MPhil(B) Directing and Dramaturgy

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September 2011

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Site-specific performance is an ever-growing field in contemporary theatre today, yet with a number of companies steering towards using a variety of spaces in which to house their work, they must also find room to shelter themselves under the large umbrella that the term “site-specific” envelops. A variety of terms have stemmed from the term site-specific performance including “site-determined”, ‘site-referenced’, ‘site-conscious’, ‘site-responsive’, ‘context-specific’” (Pearson, 2010, p.8). With all these different strands of site-specific performance ‘site’ remains at the forefront of each term. It is this relationship with the site which is so unique to site-specific performance. This essay will explore the relationship between site and the performance devised for the site. It will discuss how different companies working in the genre have approached this relationship and explored “what is ‘of’ the site” and “what is brought ‘to’ it” (Turner, 2004, p.374). The essay will specifically look at the work of Brith Gof and Wrights and Sites, two companies who not only work in the field but also write extensively on the theory behind site-specific performance. It will go on to discuss, in light of the workings of these companies with the site, my own collaborative work *Stop the Clocks* (2011). A site-specific performance co-directed with Jo Newman and collaboratively devised with the cast, *Stop the Clocks* took place in the Newman Brothers coffin fittings works in the Jewellery Quarter area of Birmingham in June 2011.¹ It will discuss our relationship to the site when devising and performing the work, in the light of current and past work within the genre of site-specific performance. There are a number of factors that practitioners encounter when approaching site-specific theatre. Peter Brook claimed that he can “take any empty space and call it a stage” (1996 p.1), yet it is far more complicated than that. By applying this quote to site-specific work a number of questions are raised. In a philosophical sense, how empty are the spaces site-specific companies are using and how might the space influence the performance? Surely no space is truly empty, as left at

¹ The Newman Brothers Coffin fitting works is owned by the Birmingham Conservation trust who kindly donated the space for our project <http://birminghamconservationtrust.org/>

site will be traces of what has happened there before, layers of history and meaning; the site is often referred to as a “palimpsest” (Turner, 2004, p.373; Kaye, 2000, p.11). So then, what does the site provide for a company wanting to work outside a traditional theatre building and how does the performance reveal the site through the work?

The site-specific genre began as a move away from traditional theatre buildings to performance in a variety of other non-theatre spaces. A definition by Patrice Pavis cited in Mike Pearson’s *Site-specific Performance* states that:

The term refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo outside an established theatre). A large part of the work has to do with researching a place, often an unusual one that is imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere: an airplane hangar, unused factory, city neighbourhood, house or apartment. The insertion of a classical or modern text in this found space throws new light on it, gives it an unsuspected power and places the audience at an entirely different relationship to the text, the place and the purpose for being there...

(Pearson, 2010 p.7).

This definition was written in 1998 and much has developed in the thirteen years since. It is a text-based argument and does not consider work that devises a text from the site rather than bringing an established play text into a site. It also seems to simplify it into being a performance “outside an established theatre” yet there have been performances referenced as site-specific which have worked in a theatre. For example, David Leddy’s company Fire Exit’s piece *Sub Rosa* (2009) took place at the Citizen’s theatre in Glasgow in 2009 and took the audience on a “late-night tour of an empty building. Theatre ghosts lead us through hidden

rooms, into a derelict bar and beneath the stage” (Leddy, 2010). Brith Gof also set one of their performances in a theatre auditorium entitled *Patagonia* (1993). Mike Pearson, co-artistic director of Brith Gof, comments that “the aim of *Patagonia* was to make site-specific performance in an auditorium” (2010, p.165). In this way then, these companies are using site-specific approaches in a theatre building - they are treating the auditorium as they would a non-theatre space, regarding “the stage as a site with a particular set of architectural characteristics rather than a neutral space of representation” (Pearson, 2010, p.165). Both these performances used various areas of the theatre building in their production and were not using the space as other non-site-specific performance would. They were making a strong connection with the variety of spaces in the theatre. The performance space does not become; “just an interesting and disinterested backdrop” (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.23) or an “immobile lifeless container” (Wiles, 2003, p.7). It is also important here to define what a traditional theatre space is and what it is in these theatre buildings that site-specific genre is rejecting. They are rejecting the restrictive nature of the theatre building which house “western theatre plays have been produced behind a proscenium arch to an audience seated facing the stage” (Oddey and White, 2009, p.232). Even other spaces in a theatre which have more flexibility than the traditional proscenium arch, such as the black box studio space, are still housed in this theatre building which site-specific companies are avoiding. Wiles comments on the black box space saying the “illusion of flexibility has gone. The insistent rectilinearity of walls and of seating units positioned according to the dictates of the safety officer, the fixed position of the control box and the glowing green exit signs impose their iron discipline”(Wiles, 2003, p.255). It is this restrictive nature of the traditional theatre which site specific companies are gravitating away from. When referring to the traditional theatre building or space in this essay the above definitions are being used.

It seems that in the move from traditional theatre spaces to alternative spaces which offer a plethora of previous uses, layered meanings, histories and interpretations, the theatre practitioner is offered a wealth of creative possibilities and a lack of restrictions. Fiona Wilkie, in her essay “Mapping the Terrain”, comments that for many site-specific companies the move away from a traditional theatre space is an “explicitly political one” (2002, p.144). She cites Lone Twin’s reasoning as being to engender “ideas of place and community” (2002, p.144) which is particularly relevant to this company as they work closely with community when performing their projects. Their choice of spaces makes this possible with a range of performances taking place in public spaces in various city or town centre locations. One project, *Speeches* (1998), invites members of the public to devise a speech with a professional speech writer to “create proclamations based on their knowledge and experience of a particular location” (Lone Twin, 2010). The speech is then spoken at the place which it has been written about, for a public audience. The move away from a traditional theatre building for Lone Twin gives them the opportunity to explore a range of spaces such as boats, quaysides and city streets, and what they signify to the people who inhabit them. In giving these reasons for not using a traditional theatre building they are stating that the traditional theatre building restricts them from exploring these factors. Wilkie comments that amongst the companies in her survey of site-specific theatre there is a “tendency to treat site-specific theatre work as a means of moving away from the strict codes of the traditional theatre and encouraging creative freedom” (2002, p.249). Indeed it is evident that in site-specific performance much more exploration and experimentation can occur, especially with space. The work does not have to abide by theatrical conventions or the cultural connotations apparent at a traditional theatre. Simon Persighetti of Wrights and Sites comments on his experience of making site-specific work;

A play inside a theatre is nearly always viewed within a temporary or ephemeral frame. The use of a non-theatre space suggests the empowering of the artist and the development of a wider audience. There was certain freshness about the platforms because you were able to see new work without the obvious cultural trappings of auditorium or studio theatre.

(Wrights and Sites, 2000, unpaginated).

The practitioners are not trapped by the confines of the theatre building and what the building holds. Even though site specific work is still framed as a performance and performance is still “set aside from everyday life by contractual arrangements and modes of behaviour” (Pearson, 2010, p.141), the connotations and the ‘cultural trappings’ of the theatre are not apparent at site.

Wrights and Sites are a company based in Exeter “committed to producing experimental, site-specific work across a range of media” (Wrights and Sites, 2010). It is interesting to look at their definition of the site-specific genre when exploring how they approach the relationship of the site and the performance which they devise. They propose a seemingly succinct attempt at a definition of the variances of work that are performed outside a traditional theatre space. These come under four headings:

Outside theatre: e.g. Shakespeare in the Park, Site sympathetic theatre: e.g. Existing performance text physicalized in a selected site, Site Generic Theatre: e.g. performance generated for a series of like site’s car parks, swimming pools and Site-specific theatre: e.g. performance specifically generated from/for one selected site layers of the site are revealed through reference to: historical documentation, site

usage (past and present), found text, objects, actions, sounds, etc, anecdotal guidance, personal association, half-truths and lies, site morphology (physical and vocal explorations of site)

(Wrights and Sights, 2001, unpaginated).

Having looked at two definitions from Pavis and Wright and Sites, we can see that there are sometimes contradictions between attempted definitions of site-specific performance. What Pavis defines as site-specific, Wrights and Sites define as site-sympathetic; “existing performance text physicalized in a selected site” (Wrights and Sights, 2001, unpaginated) Or Pavis’s definition could be seen to cover all of these off-shoots of the genre that Wrights and Sites propose. However the definitions offered by Wrights and Sites seem to take in a wider wealth of work and are a succinct attempt at clarifying the differences in the field of site-specific performance. Yet it is clear that there are some problems with trying to ‘pigeon-hole’ some work into one of these particular definitions. There is certain work that would seem to cross over more than one definition and classification. For example an outdoor production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* could be categorised as ‘outside theatre’ yet it could also fit into the category of ‘site sympathetic’ if the production was performed outside in a forest, and then could also be said to be ‘site-generic’, as it could be performed in a number of different forests. However the explanation of site-specific in particular seems to be a suitable and detailed definition, especially when looking Wrights and Sites’ work as the many ‘layers’ of the site are of central importance when they approach creating a site-specific piece. For example their project *The Quay Thing* (1998), a season of site-specific performances on Exeter Quayside, began with a strong research ethic. They began “trawling through old newspaper articles about the Quay; writing down snippets of conversation” (Wrights and Sites, 2001, unpaginated). In this way they would go into the devising process

well informed as to the intricacies of the site, “to create work in response to place, rather than to use site as a quirk of production” (Wrights and Sites, 2001, unpaginated). The site, and place of site, is therefore central to their site-specific performance work, yet when working with a site they encounter a number of challenges that they need to address. Before going on to produce a series of performances to include in *The Quay Thing*, Wrights and Sites created a variety of pilot performances in *The Quay Thing (Pilot)* (2008). In Cathy Turner’s particular pilot project, *Pilot: Navigation* (2008), she created a boat tour along Exeter Quayside. In this project the audience were situated in a boat where a tour guide narrated the journey, merging fact and fiction. Along the canal bank actors created pictures of “Muses” which the tour guide would comment upon. For Cathy Turner when writing about her pilot performance, *Pilot: Navigation*, the tensions were apparent and opposing;

on the one hand, there was the desire to put the focus firmly on the audience's relationship to the site 'in itself'. On the other hand, there was the impulse to interpret the site - to present a 'reading' of site as symbol.

(Wrights and Sites, 2000, unpaginated)

However it seems as though she achieves a merging of these two tensions in this project. The site does become symbolic as

the recycling plant was given a redemptive, regenerative role not fully in accord with either its physical attributes or its environmental efficacy. The boatyard, similarly, became a symbol of triumphant creativity, rather than a location for dilettante carpentry and squabbling over leases

(Wrights and Sites, 2000, unpaginated)

yet at the same time the audience member had a strong relationship with the site at the point in the journey when they are each given small picture frames. The audience members are given these frames to hold up to the various views and sites along the journey allowing them to create a picture of the site for themselves. This moment intrinsically links the audience's experience to the site and lets the site speak to each individual audience member mediated only by them. The audience, in this moment, are given the creative agency to frame and view the site how they wish; they can see their chosen landscape through each of these picture frames. Turner comments it was these "brief moments of silent looking" that "rooted the piece within the space" (2001, unpaginated). Not only does this moment root the piece within the site, it also strengthens the audience member's relationship with the site. In her writings on this project it is clear that the defining feature of the work was that the site was central to any creative decisions, it seemed to be the common denominator that the piece would keep coming back to and addressing. She states that "the piece had become such a cacophony of voices, such an intricate entwining of stories, that we needed to be clear about the way in which they were all linked together by their association, imaginative or actual, with the site" (2001, unpaginated). In Wrights and Sites' approach to the site, the site is of central importance and is a focal inspiration from which to devise the piece. The performance piece creates a symbolic parallel for the site whilst at the same time having a strong connection with the site from its significant influence in the devising process.

Mike Pearson of Brith Gof offers a similar attempt to define site-specific work saying that site-specific performances are conceived for, and conditioned by, the particulars of found spaces, (former) sites of work, play and worship. They make manifest,

celebrate, confound or criticise location, history function, architecture, micro climate... They are an interpenetration of the found and the fabricated.

(Kaye, 1996, p.211)

This is similar in some ways to Wrights and Sites' approach, even though it does not split the definition up into different sub genres. It is clear that the layers of the site, its "location, history, function, architecture, micro-climate" (Kaye, 1996, p.211) are all important factors when making site-specific work. Like Wrights and Sites, the site is of focal importance and in other writings Brith Gof state that site-specific performances are "inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible" (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.23). Indeed, for Brith Gof, a strict bond with site is implied. It is interesting then to look at this statement in the light of some of their work. For example the initial perception of *Gododdin* (1988) is that its site and subject matter do not seem to fit together. *Gododdin* is a performance which originally took place in a disused Rover car factory and is the realisation of a Welsh epic poem, *Y Gododdin*, which describes a sixth century battle between Celtic warriors and Anglo-Saxons. Even Pearson comments on this; when discussing concept and site he states that "their relationship may be *incongruent* or *paradoxical*, including orders of material unusual, inappropriate or perverse here: a sixth century battle elegy in a car factory" (2010, p.149). The links are not obvious at first yet when the themes of both materials are examined more deeply a link is made. Cliff McLucas comments that performing this piece where "there were no longer cars being manufactured-all kinds of resonances about cultural, economic and regional decline are brought in" (Kaye, 1996, p.213). The theme of cultural decline links the poem, which commented on the slaughtering of Welsh warriors, with the site of the disused Rover car factory. The theme of this cultural decline of a Welsh nation described in the poem and the decline of the industrial age of the car factory are the factors

which strongly parallel the site and performance. Another factor with *Goddodin* which seems not to necessarily fit in with Brith Gof's assertions that the performances are "inseparable from their sites" (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.23), is the fact that the work was toured to locations other than car factories. However it is the approach to each of the sites which makes these pieces site-specific. These locations included a quarry in Italy, a crane factory in Germany and the Tramway, an old Tram Depot in Glasgow. According to Wrights and Sites' definitions, *Goddodin* would be seen as being "Site Generic Theatre: e.g. performance generated for a series of like sites" (2001, unpaginated). Yet each time that the performance piece was toured to a different site the performance would have to change slightly to fit the particular location both in terms of set and scenery, but also interpretations of the performance would change depending on place. McLucas comments that when touring the work, the company came across "all the problems of an interface with a new place. I think the word place is important rather than site" (Kaye, 1996, p.215). The cultural connotations of the place for McLucas were important. By transferring the piece into the different cultures of the countries to which they toured, the site and piece would be significantly altered. In particular when they toured the work to Germany the piece had very different connotations. They comment "a piece of work within Wales which is about 'nationalism' takes on entirely different meanings when transported into Germany" (Kaye, 1996, p.219). It seems then that it is not possible to fully transfer a site-specific piece of work and that it has an attachment with each site it is performed in. Each time that the performance was moved, Cliff McLucas "made an incredible renegotiation with site - and in a way in which the work can begin to remake itself" (Kaye, 1996, p.215). It is possible to move work like this, but the influence of the site onto the performance which is brought to it is so important the work will inevitably be altered. The performance of *Goddodin* in Italy is no longer the same piece of work that was performed in Wales, neither is it the same piece of work that was performed in Hamburg. It is

conditioned by the sites that it is performed in and negotiates with. The sites will indeed “always be apparent as context, framing and sub text” (Pearson, 2010, p.35).

Other practitioners are also of the view that site and performance are to have a strict bond in site-specific work. Nick Kaye, in his book *Site-specific Art: Performance, place and documentation*, cites Serra, a site-specific artist, commenting on the removal of his artwork from the site of creation; he says that “to remove the work is to destroy the work” (2000, p.2). This echoes Pearson’s words previously cited in which he ascertains that site-specific performances are “inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible” (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.23). These seem to be quite restrictive statements and as Dan Rebellato comments practitioners with the above views are saying that the work is “bound within the space for which it was made and closed to further meanings that might multiply its possibilities” (2006, p.109). To restrict the work in this fashion when the nature of site-specific work is to move away from the restrictive seems detrimental. It is clear from the above example of *Goddodin* that the work can be moved to another site which complements the piece and continues to inform the work. There are a number of site-specific productions in which the move of location has developed the work. David Leddy’s production of *Sub Rosa* (2009) did just this. It was originally performed in a theatre building, using the scenery dock, under the stage, wardrobe department, small public bar and the auditorium upper balcony, but when it was toured to Edinburgh it was performed in an old Masonic lodge. This new site developed the piece as it fit “perfectly with the themes and atmosphere of the piece, particularly that of hidden, secret spaces that gives *Sub Rosa* its title” (Leddy, 2010). To say that moving the work is destroying it is restrictive. The movement of a site specific work will understandably alter and inform the piece yet it is also possible that it will open up the piece to more creative possibilities.

Another company who have moved their apparent site-specific work is The Other Way Works with their piece entitled *Black Tonic* (2009) performed in hotels in Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and London. The performance tells the story of Anna who is a “professional relationship restorer” and a couple Steve and Helen who are about to become her next clients. However Lena, the hotel maid, has had her relationship destroyed by Anna and seeks to stop her from destroying another relationship. It is a thriller in which the audience members piece together clues which unravel the story for them. The performance plays out in the hotel lobby, lift, corridors and three hotel rooms. Two pairs of audience members are lead around by maids, instructions posted under their hotel room doors and phone calls to their rooms. In terms of where this work lies within the genres of site-specific performance it could be seen to be site-generic, according to Wrights and Sites’ definitions, as it was a performance piece made for a range of different hotels. The approaches of the company in the relationship to the site are similar to those adopted by Wrights and Sites and Brith Gof as the work was devised from the themes and influences of hotels. The site was the first stimulus; themes surrounding hotels and hotel life inform the writing and the piece as a whole. It fully explores the anonymity one can experience in a hotel. The company “researched hotels: undertook detective work; tried to get under the hotel's skin; watched and listened to the other guests” (The Other Way Works, 2009). As the piece is performed in working hotels, the entire site of the hotel performs for an audience. Unsuspecting residents at the hotel may wander into the action at any point and at times it is hard to tell where the performance ends and where reality begins. The relationship between each site of the hotel and the performance piece are still interlinked even though it would be defined as site-generic, which implies less of a connection between site and subject. Moving this performance piece

from hotel to hotel “does not destroy the work” (Kaye, 2000, p.2) in any way, but enriches it through the further interaction of the unknowing participants in the hotel.

Dan Rebellato also acknowledges Serra’s comments and states that many site-specific companies are “moving away from this position” (2006, p.109) of a fixed site of performance, particularly Wrights and Sites with their *Mis-Guides* “that seem to strive to make the city non-identical with itself” (Rebellato, 2006, p.109). The *Exeter Mis-guide* (Hodge et al, 2003) is a guidebook which offers an alternative guide to Exeter, suggesting various walks or activities to undertake in the city. The *Mis-Guide* creates a tour that the audience member takes individually or in small groups, discovering the city in alternative ways. For example one suggestion is to create an A-Z of the city through photographs. Turner comments that “though it is not theatre, it is conceived as the stimulus for a series of actions, or performances to be carried out by readers, who become walkers in the city’s spaces” (2004, p.385). This seems to give a lot of freedom in terms of what rules the readers/walkers had to abide by; of course routes were suggested, but many were open suggestions - “one ‘walk’ literally suggests that the walker should ‘play safely in a forbidden place’” (Turner, 2004, p.387). This gives the “audience” an “open invitation to reimagine and remake the city while simultaneously discovering it anew” (Turner, 2004, p.385). With this exploration of the *Exeter Mis-Guide* Wrights and Sites went on to create a *Misguide to Anywhere* (Hodge et al, 2006) which ascertains that it can be taken and applied to any city in the world. The *Mis-guides* aimed to explore some of the historical connotations of the site as a local historian was included in the steering group, yet their main concern was that they wanted participants to reimagine and rediscover a place. It suggests that the reader or walker will have a stronger link with the site and see a different side to the city which had previously gone unnoticed. The guides have therefore made the participant reassess their connection with the site. “The *Mis-Guide* hopes

to enable a potential space between walker and the city, but not one that is sealed off from the possibility of challenge” (Turner, 2004, p.387). The approach that Wrights and Sites take with the city, Turner comments as being ‘Mythogeography’ where “the personal fictional and mythical are placed on an equal footing with factual, municipal history” and in this way the “city becomes a ‘potential space, a place of enquiry and invention” (Pearson, 2010, p.25). This process of Mythogeography can be applied to Forced Entertainment, another company who seem to be developing on from the fixed position of site and performance. This is most notable in their production of *Nights in this City* (1995)

Nights in This City was first performed in Sheffield and is essentially a bus tour of the city. However, this is no ordinary bus tour as the company “engage in a ‘writing over the city”” (Kaye, 2000, p.8) The bus tour begins quite conventionally with the bus driver pointing out various places where he used to live and work, but with the introduction of a tour guide, the tour “becomes progressively more distracted” (Kaye, 2000, p.7). The tour guide’s comments become increasingly imaginary; “all the streets round here got named after famous football hooligans from history” (Kaye, 2000, p.7). They are completely reinterpreting the site, almost ignoring what is actually there. However by not acknowledging what is there and talking of other invented people and places, the absence of these talked about sites seems to bring the presence of the actual site (the streets of Sheffield) to the forefront of the production. Nick Kaye comments that “*Nights in This City* articulates a curious displacement from a site whose particularities cannot be easily or appropriately named” (2000, p.8). In the same sense as the *Mis-guides*, Forced Entertainment are offering a re-imagination of the city. The production was also toured to Rotterdam where the company asked local people questions in order to inform their process. Instead of asking the location of certain interesting buildings or historical sites, they asked questions “which implied generic narratives or events

linked to dramatic themes” (Kaye, 2000, p.8). The piece was successfully relocated even though it was originally made in and for Sheffield, this could be due to the nature of the ‘writing over’ of the city, yet Kaye ascertains that this process of ‘writing over’ the city acts out a “*moving on* from the real city inscribed into the very attempt to know it”(2000, p.8).

In light of the work discussed, it is clear that the site can have a strong influence on the piece even if it is not in the original site in which it was first performed. This strict bond that Brith Gof imply isn’t restricting the movement of the performance piece from its original site but instead it is emphasising the significant influence that site has on performance. Brith Gof propose a theory which explores this relationship of site and performance. They talk of site-specific work containing the ‘host’ and the ‘ghost’, with the performance, the ghost, haunting the site, the host, for a period of time. They state that “the host and the ghost, of different origins, are co existent but crucially are not congruent” (Kaye, 1996, p.220). When talking of their production of *Haern* they stated that “like all ghosts, *Haern’s* body is not solid, the host can be seen through it” (Kaye, 1996, p.220). This metaphor for site and performance shows the ways in which the performance does not mask the site but that the site can be seen in the spaces of the performance. It also shows that no matter what is brought to the site the host still remains solid and can always be see through the transparent nature of the performance. The site will always influence the ghost therefore, and many times the ghost will merge with the host and they will begin to “bleed into each other” (2010, p.149). Pearson provides a variety of questions to consider of both the host and the ghost when approaching site-specific work, questioning “that which is of the site” for example “does the history function or nature of the site suggest a particular subject matter or form?” He also questions “that which is brought to the site”, such as “does the site necessitate the employment of particular techniques to overcome the material difficulties here?” (2010,

p.101). With 'checklists' such as these it is evident that there are many factors companies need to consider when approaching a site and, even though it is creatively less restrictive than a traditional theatre building, it does come with its own set of challenges. There are obvious challenges which occur on site such as the health and safety aspect of the buildings. By performing in an old abandoned factory, for example, there are inevitably a number of rusty nails needing to be covered and some areas of the building restricted. Yet once these are overcome they tend not to restrict the creative process any longer. In the nature of the site being a "palimpsest" (Turner, 2004, p.373; Kaye, 2000, p.11), there are many layers of the site that are present, its function, history, place in society, its stories, its architecture. If a practitioner chooses to ignore these things and bring a work that is completely incongruent to the site problems can arise as "site-specific performance might, then, in some instances be figured as colonisation" (Wilkie, 2002, p.258). The practitioner could be seen to be using the site purely as a "quirk of production" (Wrights and Sites, 2001, p.1) and by doing this the performance may mask the site with what is brought to it.

In the process of creating site-specific work a deep exploration of the site must occur in order for the performance to understand and attempt to interpret the site without masking and having no connection to the site whatsoever. Brith Gof's use of the term "archaeology" is interesting when approaching a site. Here "archaeology is posited as performative (an enactment of the past in the present) and site-specific performance is viewed as an archaeological investigation of place" (Turner, 2004, p.376). It is a useful analogy to be used for the deep exploration of the site that is necessary to undertake when approaching a site-specific performance. However it seems to imply a historic approach and this can sometimes lead to a re-enactment of the past which can be seen as museum or heritage theatre rather than site-specific performance. When exploring a site it is evident that there are a

number of meanings, stories and previous uses in that one site. How is it possible then to interpret these without writing over some of them and does it matter? It seems that many site-specific companies reflect the view that it is impossible to “re-enact the million, million occurrences which have happened” (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.23) in a site as in “attempting to deal with so much, the performance would be able to explore very little” (Wilkie, 2002, p.258). Some aspects of the site are bound to be ignored in the performance but nonetheless there must be a reciprocal process and the host of the site will always remain seen through the ghost of performance. The interest seems to lie, especially with Brith Gof’s work, with how the site and the performance work together and how these “elements are envisaged as co-creative” (Turner, 2004, p.385).

The influence of the site in *Stop the Clocks*

The reciprocal relationship of the site and the performance work was something I was interested in exploring in my own work. I wanted to see how the site could be used as a primary inspiration for the devising process and how it affected and enriched this process. In my collaborative work *Stop the Clocks*, the disused Newman Brother’s Coffin fittings factory in the Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham was the site of our performance. As a site, the coffin fittings factory had a number of factors to consider when approaching devising a performance for the space. It was a previous place of work for over 100 years, a 19th Century, Grade II-listed factory which closed its doors in 1998. It spans a wide period of history and lives and there was therefore a rich history present at the factory and a wealth of material to research in our preliminary devising processes. The factory made coffin fittings for hundreds of people including famous people such as Winston Churchill and Princess Diana. This rich history is not just confined to the site but also the area in which the building is located. The Jewellery

Quarter was an industrial hub of Birmingham and its influence on the building brings with it cultural considerations of place. We needed to decide where the parameters of the site lay and what to include in these parameters. Were we focussing purely on the site itself, or did we need to take into account its place in society at its time of production in order for the piece to fit into definitions of site-specific performance? We were certainly of the view that in no way can any artist attempt to “re-enact the million, million occurrences which have happened” (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.23) nor did we want to slip into the realms of museum or heritage theatre, our concerns were with site-specific performance. We did not want the piece to be a re-enactment of how the coffin factory once used to be as this can sometimes be limiting in itself. Pearson comments on a project entitled *Coal House*, for BBC Wales in 2009 where cottages next to an ironworks were used to re-enact the nineteenth century working and living conditions there. Pearson comments that “after the filming was completed one cottage was left fully furnished to ‘allow visitors to see the living conditions endured by families in the series’, though not, one supposes, those endured by families in 1927” (2010, p.106). It is impossible to re-enact the past authentically. We felt in our project therefore that there are more limitations by abiding strictly to a representation of how the factory was. Instead we wished to create something that would be a re-imagination of the past in the present and a reinterpretation of the site.

Interested in Cathy Turner’s term of ‘mythogeography’, combining the mythical and fictional with factual history (Pearson, 2010, p.25), we wished to use the influences of the site’s history to create something that was a re-interpretation of the space in the present but also resonated with the site’s previous uses. We assumed that people might have set ideas when coming to a performance in a coffin fittings factory influenced by ghost tours and haunted houses, the audience may have expected something along these lines. However we

wanted the site to be free from all these connotations to create a more positive space and reinterpret the site so the audience would be able to look at it anew; “changing the way people perceive places” (McAuley, 2006, p.151 in Pearson 2010, p.25). We decided we did not want to bring a text to the site and impose this upon the site. Bringing a play-text already written into a site to be performed would, in my opinion, mask the site significantly. It would need to be reworked carefully to consider the effect that the site would have on the piece, or the site would just become as the stage is in traditional theatre, “just an interesting and disinterested backdrop” (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.23). Instead we wanted to collaboratively devise a piece using the site as our central stimulus. In this way the site had a strong influence on our devising process and would be the common denominator to which we kept returning throughout the process.

Our concept was “inspired by...the characteristics of the place” (Pearson, 2010, p.148) it gave us our concept as McLucas comments “deciding to create a work in a ‘used’ building might provide a theatrical foundation or springboard...it might get us several rungs up the theatrical ladder before we begin” (cited in Pearson, 2010, p.149). In terms of Brith Gof’s considerations of the ‘host’ and the ‘ghost’, our building was such an imposing host that regardless of what the ghost was that we brought into the site, the host and the ghost would begin to “bleed into each other” (2010, p.149) and therefore the site would heavily influence the performance. As, even though the site had been emptied of the majority of its paraphernalia which had been left behind when it closed in 1998, there were still a large number of traces of what the factory once was. There still remained pieces of machinery, old order forms and rusty coffin fittings. These were all part of the “fixtures and fittings” (Pearson 2010, p.35) of the site and when coming into the site inspired us to begin devising. We wanted to create something that would become, as McLucas calls it, a hybrid of performance

which combines the “performance (ghost), the place (host) and the public” (Pearson, 2010, p.143). We wanted to make the piece specific to the site in some way whether that is in “subject matter, theme, and dramatic structure” (Pearson 2010, p.149). We wished ultimately to explore the notions of site-specific performance in our work and where our performance could fit into this field. We wanted site to be a central influence to our piece and using it as our primary stimulus for devising helped us in this. We started our devising process similarly to Pearson’s process with “a process of *research*, frequently interdisciplinary research: into site and subject” (2010, p.151). We began our process by reading personal testimonies and interviews from people who either worked at the site or from relatives of people who worked at the factory. From this point the work grew completely from these influences. They sparked animated discussions about the apparent lively environment of the factory and the way in which the workers viewed death. In the Victorian era we found that great importance was placed upon funeral services and no expense would be spared when organising them. Cemeteries were central to the communities in which people lived; therefore death was a major part of life. It was touching to hear some testimonies that described their work as celebrating people’s lives and this, together with the lively atmosphere of an apparently depressing place, was something that we wanted to capture within our piece. We wanted to create a similar atmosphere of celebration within our piece which would resonate with the buildings past atmosphere. We also researched funerals in England and in different cultures; many discussions into death and many devising exercises later our concept became clear. The coffin factory would, in our conceptual landscape, be a place where our cast of storytellers would carry out alternative funeral services to tell the stories of, and therefore celebrate, peoples’ lives. The site therefore became a symbolic representation of the factory. In this way it is similar to the route that Cathy Turner became more interested in when working on her *Pilot: Navigation*, “I knew that I was more interested in the site as symbol, than in its physical

presence. I knew that it was the emptiness, not the structure that fascinated me: this was a place in waiting, its previous functions outgrown, and its future uncertain” (Wrights and Sites, 2001, unpaginated).

Our particular performance would tell the story of the life of a fictional character, Mary Fincher. This celebration of life paralleled the strong themes with which the devising process had been informed and paralleled the work of the coffin factory celebrating people’s lives. Even though we did not mention the coffin factory directly in our piece, and this may seem like the concept was not entirely congruent with the factory, we were not ignoring the site. Pearson talks of the tension between concept and site, commenting that it may be inspired by the site and fit with the site completely yet the “performance may equally impose a concept on site” (Pearson, 2010, p.148). Yet even though we were imposing this upon the site and not mentioning the coffin factory directly, the entire concept was completely informed by and derived from the site as a stimulus. The majority of our rehearsals, especially ones where we were devising, took place in the site and the architecture and themes therefore were at the forefront of our minds when devising our performance. There were also other parallels between the coffin factory and our performance, and as well as the site being symbolic the audience were able to have a direct relationship with the site. In our final sequence the metal box containing the distinctive objects from Mary’s life was carried in a ‘funeral procession’ to its resting place in one of the shelves of a previous storeroom. In this end sequence the audience were given headphones to listen to Mary’s voice reflecting on her life. The audience, whilst listening to this, were led back through the space and the rooms in which they had seen Mary’s life played out before them. There was one performer in each room as traces of what the scenes in those rooms had represented. The audience now had a

greater sense of attachment to the space and to the stories within these spaces having already experienced them. The stories had in some way altered these spaces and there was a heightened awareness that there were many more stories to be told. At the end of the procession the audience were given time to explore the end room where there were a number of boxes, similar to Mary's, in some of the shelves. Other shelves were empty with a name tag waiting for its box. This moment where the audience were able to explore the space emphasised the link between the concept and the site and therefore the audience could connect with the site in their own way; at this point they could look where they wanted to look creating their own view of the space. It was the "brief moments of silent looking" that "rooted the piece within the space" (Wrights and Sites, 2001, unpaginated) similar to Turner's audience's experience in *The Quay Thing (pilot)* (1998) previously discussed. The parallels to the space and the performance were clear here. The storeroom for coffin pieces had now become a store room for people's lives and the empty shelves were waiting for boxes to arrive so the whole process could start again. The metal boxes were actually products of the factory and contained some old coffin fittings pieces. The metal box that we used in the performance was filled with significant objects from Mary's life which helped to tell and celebrate moments from it, on the other hand the metal boxes used to be filled with coffin fittings pieces which also would be used in a celebration of a life; a funeral. With these parallels therefore there was a strong link between the site and the performance piece.

In terms of how our piece fits into the many different current definitions of site-specific performance, Brith Gof state that the "power of site-specific work is that it somehow activates or engages with the narratives of the site in some kind of way. That might be to do with its architecture, or it might be to do with the character of the building" (Pearson, 2010, p.3). However the performance piece connects with the site, the site will "always be apparent

as context, framing, subject” (Pearson, 2010, p.35). The coffin factory was a strong subtext for the themes of our piece and thus framed the entire performance in this way. It was not necessarily at the forefront of the piece yet in terms of Pearson’s discussions on the ‘host and ghost’, the questions that he sets for what is of the site and what is brought to the site were important for us to answer when establishing how we used the site in our performance. One question that struck us as an important and relevant one was “how are the architecture, history, function, location, microclimate of the site apparent as subject matter framing and subtext?”(Pearson, 2010, p.181). The mention of architecture in this question was a particularly important point for us to consider.

We also aimed to embrace the architecture of the space. We did not bring too many material aesthetics to the space such as set, dressing and props but used a limited amount of props to conjure up other locations in the factory. We used limited lighting relying for the most part on natural light where we could and then torch light and candlelight elsewhere. We chose not to bring in any theatrical lights. One reason for this was practical as the building did not have electricity, yet we also felt that bringing in recognisable theatrical technical equipment would not enhance the site any more than using natural, torch and candle light. In the same way we did not use any theatrical sound equipment, but relied on acoustic sound and sound generated from the performers. The only device we did use were the Mp3s but these did not mask the architecture of the site as other sound systems would have done. In some ways we felt that

any space may be besieged or plundered in an exotic manner with special effects but if those effects are more commonly used in the rock concert, opera, political rally or

military tattoo, then the chances are that the space itself will be masked, will become just an arena to be colonised by a particular package of imported aesthetics.

(Wrights and Sites, 2001, unpaginated).

Cliff McLucas has a similar view to this. When working on the design *Goddodin* he states a “distaste for theatrical lighting at this point led me to work with only the factory’s own fluorescents.” (Pearson, 2010, p.114) Without using these recognisable theatrical technical elements the coffin factory building could clearly be seen even though we created a number of different locales in each room. We tried to use features of the factory that were there provided for us already so we did not modify the space in which we were working; we were working with the architectures available to us. For example one room had the feel and look of the inside of a shed. As one of our stories was about a child locked in a shed we used this space at the place where we located this story by only enhancing the space that was given to us by adding a few props of plant pots, buckets and spades, we created a convincing environment for that scene. It was directly influenced by the architecture of the site. McLucas, when working on *Goddodin*, was influenced by the architecture of the site in a similar way, Pearson comments “he explains the significance of the existing architecture: rows of columns and roof lights inspiring the avenue of trees” (2010, p.114). So the existing architecture influenced the scenery brought to the site and in this way the technical elements were incorporated well within the site. In our piece we are not transforming the room completely and masking the site but instead we are bringing another ‘ghost’ to the ‘host’. One of Pearson’s questions when approaching a site is whether the site can “allow the construction of a second ‘ghost’ architecture within its ‘host’?”(2010, p.181). In this way then the site, the ‘host’, can be seen through the ‘ghost’ of the shed and the ‘ghost’ of the performance. The sounds that we used in

this scene came from the other rooms and stairways of the building and it was as though these memories that we were hearing about were somehow housed in this building. Even though the noises were part of Mary's story, they were also part of the space and it seemed as though the audience were hearing the voices of the coffin factory. Again, the many layers of the building itself were explored.

So what is our piece's relationship to the site when looking at the varying definitions of site-specific work? When trying to fit our piece into definitions of site-specific performance the lines begin to blur between the varying definitions. In our interpretation of the site as a symbolic place rather than the literal site of a coffin fittings factory there are similarities to Wrights and Sites' work. Yet, when looking at their attempted definitions, it is difficult to see where exactly it lies comfortably. In terms of Wrights and Sites definition of the term site-specific our piece is in line with some of these assertions. The piece was "generated from...one selected site" and in terms of our research the "layers of the site are revealed through reference to: historical documentation, site usage past and present, found text, objects...". In performance our piece was filled with "half-truths and lies" (Wrights and Sites, 2001, unpaginated). Yet it could also be possible that our piece could lie in the site-generic definitions, as it could potentially be performed in a series of like sites, such as a range of industrial spaces. However, just like *Goddodin*, as previously discussed, to move this work would significantly alter it. If *Stop the Clocks* were moved it would completely lose the parallels of the celebration of life in death which are clear in the piece. When considering Patrice Pavis's comments that the site gives "performance an unusual setting of great charm and power" (Pearson, 2010, p.7) to call our work site-generic would lose some of this "charm and power" and also its connections with the specific themes of the coffin factory. As I have stated before, to transport the work into another space, even if it is a 'like site', it will not be

the same piece as was originally performed in its original site that it was devised from. It will inevitably lose its links to its original site.

The role of the audience in site-specific theatre and their relationship to the site is also an important one to consider when exploring the nature of site-specific performance. Their role in a site-specific performance is entirely different from watching a performance in a traditional theatre building. Pearson comments that site-specific performance “uses the architectural features of site to distribute its audience... providing prospects unfamiliar or impossible to conspire with in a theatre” (2010, p.176). Also, discussing the audience in site-specific performances, he states that in a theatre performance happens “over there” yet at site it may be “‘just here’, ‘up close’”(2010, p.176). Pearson cites Cathy Turner’s comments on the “vast range of perceptual roles” that an audience member has. Such as “theatre spectator, tourist, game-player, partygoer, voyeur...” (2010, p.177). In *Stop the Clocks* the site was our main focus yet the audience were just as important, indeed Fiona Wilkie comments that site “is not simply a synonym for *place* but that it includes the presence of the audience. One possible consequence of this is that to be site-specific is also to be audience-specific” (Holdsworth and Luckhurst, 2008, p.90, original emphasis).

In *Stop the Clocks* our audience had a number of roles available to them, primarily they were cast as “mourners” or participants in celebrating the life of Mary. With only ten audience members at each performance the piece lent itself to being an intimate experience for an audience. For the majority of the piece the performance happened close to the audience, for example one room contained performers giving one to one performances to each audience member. The performance was also immersive, appealing to all the audience’s senses. For example, in the shed scene the audience were able to explore the room smelling, touching

objects in the shed and hearing the noises of the rain, the distant dinner party and footsteps. Indeed Pearson comments that the “visual need not take precedence. In any one moment it may favour one or other sense” (2010, p.141). It thus became a phenomenological experience for the audience.

Site-specific performances provide immersive experiences for audiences as, unlike a performance in a traditional auditorium, where the play is performed in front of you, things are happening all around you at site. The audience become, in some moments, as involved in the performance as an actor. At certain points in *Stop the Clocks*, such as the moment of one to one performance, the spacial arrangement was so that the audience were able to not only watch the performer who was talking to them but also had the opportunity to watch the other audience members with their respective performers. In this way the audience member could also be seen as performing when interacting with their performer. In addition to this the audience would be able to look around and watch other audience members being actively involved in the performance. The sightlines are dispersed far more widely at site than in an auditorium. The audiences gaze is far less controlled at site than it is in a traditional theatre auditorium. For example in the shed room in *Stop the Clocks* the audience were given a few minutes to explore the space, encouraged to smell, touch and feel the contents of the room. Another example of this was in a room which contained a scene of Mary’s journey from Norfolk to Birmingham, where the audience were seated on the ‘train’. The direction in which the audience was sitting was not specified or fixed, as they were on stools. Even though some audience members found this part restricted them to sitting in the train formation others turned around to face different ways. They had more freedom to view the action happening either side of them, from any direction they wanted. The performers were creating scenery for the audience to look at which did guide the gaze of the audience, yet it was far less specified and controlled as their gaze would be when viewing a performance onstage from the auditorium. The action was surrounding them.

Brith Gof work in a similar way, and indeed imply that this multi-focus nature of work works better at site. They comment that the audience's "heads do not all turn in unison and more often than not within any close group of audience, individuals will be watching different things" (Pearson, 2010, p.143). This is indeed not exclusive to site and can also happen in the theatre auditorium, yet it is more likely to happen at site where it is less controlled. In some scenes we wanted the audience to look at certain things, so their movements and gaze were more controlled, yet in the moments where they were walking from room to room they had the opportunity to view the space without direction. The promenade nature of *Stop the Clocks* made this so. Kaye cites Marc Augé as saying that as a spectator or audience member is

passing over, by or through *places* 'the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of spectator were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of spectator were his own spectacle.

(Kaye, 2000, p.10, original emphasis).

This also connects to the immersive nature of our site-specific performance. There are a number of site-specific performances which display this even more so than our own production. Previously mentioned Birmingham based company The Other Way Works explored this in their production of *Black Tonic* (2008), the audience became story-makers as they pieced together the clues of the story. They were not free to wander round and explore the space completely and were guided to each room by the maids, phone calls and notes posted under hotel room doors yet they were given a lot of freedom when in these spaces. For example, at one moment the audience were ushered into a ransacked hotel room to sift through the contents of the room. In this room, there was not any action on which their gaze must be fixed but they were free to

explore the space; they could touch and smell the objects, gaining a multisensory view of the performance and the space. They pieced together the 'spectacle' and became part of what they were witnessing.

Site-specific is a term that is constantly developing and expanding. There are many differences in the range of work which would class itself or be classed as site-specific. Many of these pieces of work differ in their approach and "the experience of site-specific performance work is so varied and expansive that no clear definition or methodology of such practice seems possible" (Wrights and Sites, 2000, unpaginated). Yet one simple factor they all have in common, is a strong connection with the site, regardless of whether this is forced or not, as the site is always going to influence a piece of work unlike an auditorium does a play. The move away from these traditional buildings offers fewer restrictions, yet the site will always have its own set of challenges. Indeed the site needs to be carefully considered when devising work as comes with "a *plethora* of phenomena, all competing for attention, all potentially meaningful" (Pearson, 2010, p.1, original emphasis). It is clear that the relationship of the site and the performance piece is a reciprocal one and that the site can have a huge impact on the devising process. If something is created from a site, by using the site as a primary inspiration, then the site and performance piece become intrinsically linked. This relationship of site and performance has been explored and experimented with by many companies working in the site-specific genre. The relationship of site and performance is always central to the work, yet this relationship is constantly being developed as can be seen by companies such as Forced Entertainment and Wrights and Sites who are creating work which moves away from a fixed site. *Stop the Clocks'* central concept was the fact that it was devised completely from the themes and subjects which sprung forth from the site. In this way the relationship between site and performance was a

strong one, and within this relationship the audience were also able to have their own relationship to the site. Cliff McLucas, once stated that Brith Gof's "real site-specific work" was in their creation of work "which is a hybrid of the place, the public and the performance" (cited in Kaye, 2000, p.55). This definition seems to take into account the three important elements and relationships in site-specific performance, the site/place, the performance piece and the audience. This may appear a fairly simplified definition yet it is a very appropriate starting point in exploring the relationship between these elements in the widening and ever evolving field of site-specific performance.

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