

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

<p><b>Institution:</b> Aberystwyth University</p>
<p><b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 35</p>
<p><b>Title of case study:</b>  <i>The Persians</i> (2010) and <i>Coriolanus</i> (2012): site-specific performances created for, and produced by, National Theatre Wales (NTW).</p>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)          Departmental staff Mike Pearson, Mike Brookes and Simon Banham conceived, designed and directed theatre productions of Aeschylus's <i>The Persians</i> (2010) for NTW's launch season and <i>Coriolanus</i> for NTW in the World Shakespeare Festival/London 2012 at sites outside the auditorium.          The impacts of these productions are upon:          1) Cultural life – in generating new forms of artistic expression, delivering innovative performance products, and enriching public appreciation, understanding and imagination;          2) Policy and practice – in enhancing the status of NTW, informing and influencing programming and demonstrating that work of international standard can be produced regionally;          3) Professional practice – in pioneering and contributing original ideas, methods and approaches.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)          The collaboration with NTW is contextualised and informed by the continuing scholarly research on national theatres and on the theatres and performance traditions of Wales by departmental staff, including Anwen Jones, Roger Owen and Heike Roms.          Conceptual and creative work on <i>The Persians</i> [3.1] and <i>Coriolanus</i> [3.2] was underpinned by Pearson's long-term scholarly and practice-based research on site-specific performance and interdisciplinary approaches to location. His reflections on practical methodologies for, and critical and theoretical approaches to, site-specific performance and location [3.4-3.7].          It was supported by his extensive experiences of production with Welsh theatre company Brith Gof (1980–97), and with Brookes as Pearson/Brookes (1997-present); it was further advanced by Brookes's enduring collaboration (2002–present) on scenographic design for Manchester-based theatre company Quarantine with Banham, who is a founder member of that company and designer with its core team. Together, Pearson, Brookes and Banham have fostered practice-led research in the departmental Theatre and Performance Research Group; their practical investigations with Quarantine, with Pearson/Brookes and as solo artists are attested in scholarly literature in the field and beyond – in journals such as <i>Performance Research</i> (UK), <i>Cultural Geographies</i> (UK) and <i>About Performance</i> (Australia), and through their many conference presentations and guest seminars.          The site of <i>The Persians</i> was initially encountered and examined during a field workshop organised by Pearson and funded by the AHRC 'Landscape and Environment' programme. Among those attending were programme director Professor Stephen Daniels (University of Nottingham) and departmental staff Ames, Owen and Roms.          Specific research for <i>The Persians</i> included extended visits to the site of exposition – the military training ranges at Sennybridge, South Wales – in liaison with the British Army and Defence Estates/Landmark; and close collaboration with NTW staff in creating viable procedures of exposition in a challenging, outdoor location. Of particular note was collaboration with sound and video technicians in investigating and developing original approaches to mediated performance.          Research for <i>Coriolanus</i> included close contact with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in creating the production text – combining Shakespeare's play with elements of Brecht's version from the early 1950s – for which Pearson worked as dramaturg, and in developing vocal techniques appropriate for a complex mediated environment. And with John Hardy, Head of Contemporary Music, Composition and Creative Music Technology, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in elaborating novel combinations of live voice and recorded soundtrack to enhance audience involvement and experience.          The high level of public funding and technical, production and promotional resources provided by</p>

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NTW have greatly enhanced and privileged practice-led research undertaken in the public sphere: in developing new forms of mediated performance; in combining traditions of textual and physical theatre; and in devising complex occupations of site.

*The Persians* served to establish creative, technical and administrative procedures adopted in *Coriolan/us* for working at site and at scale, and for offering unique, immersive experiences in exciting locales. *Coriolan/us* took up and extended techniques previously pioneered: employing active audience participation as a feature of the dramaturgy; and involving sophisticated syntheses of media.

The reciprocal impact of the relationship with NTW is to focus scholarly attention on the development of the company, and to provide a direct conduit for artistic perceptions and approaches developed within an academic research context for mutual benefit.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[3.1] Pearson, M. *The Persians* (2010) (listed in REF2).

[3.2] Pearson, M. and Brookes, M. *Coriolan/us* (2012) (listed in REF2).

[3.3] The overall production costs – to cover conceptualisation, development, preparation and staging – from grant-aid and public sources via NTW was approximately *The Persians* (£150,000) and *Coriolan/us* (£200,000). To prepare the script and dramaturgy for *Coriolan/us*, Pearson was awarded £10,000 from the Aberystwyth University Roberts Research Fund.

The nature and quality of the research is further referenced and evidenced in scholarly publications:

[3.4] Pearson, M. (2010) *Site-Specific Performance*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan [includes a section on the site of *The Persians*, 135-139] (Listed in REF 2)

[3.5] Pearson, M. 2013 'Haunted House: staging *The Persians* with the British Army' *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place and Practice*, Tompkins, J. and Birch A. eds. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan (Electronic copy available)

[3.6] Pearson, M. and Shanks, M. *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001) (Hardcopy available on request)

[3.7] Pearson, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape* (2006) (Hardcopy available on request)

[3.8] Kear, A. 2013 'Theatre in the open: Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes' *The Persians* (2010) and *Coriolan/us* (2012), National Theatre Wales in *Theatre and Event: Performance and the Ethic of Interruption*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan (electronic copy available)

[3.9] Owen, R. 'The Persians', *Cyfrwng: Media Wales Journal*, 2011, vol. 8, 73-4. (electronic copy available)

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

#### Impact on cultural life: enriching public appreciation, understanding and imagination.

Both productions revealed and demonstrated the aesthetic and presentational possibilities of the hybridisation of devised performance, dramatic stage practices and media; and – in the combination of contentious site and ground-breaking production – the opportunity to offer original artistic and intellectual experiences to contemporary audiences in a theatrically sophisticated manner [5.1] Both productions sold out, though audiences were inevitably limited by the restricted nature of their sites: *The Persians*: 8 x 120 spectators; *Coriolan/us*: 8 x 350 spectators.

They were extensively previewed – including BBC Radio 4 *Front Row* (11 August 2010)[5.2] – and enthusiastically reviewed, in the Welsh and UK press. *The Persians* was included in *The Daily Telegraph*'s list of ten best UK productions of 2010 [5.3]; and *Coriolan/us* as one of the ten best UK productions of 2012 in *The Observer* (15 December 2012) – '...National Theatre Wales's galvanic *Coriolan/us*' [5.4].

'This [*The Persians*] is extraordinary, one of the most imaginative, powerful and haunting theatrical events of the year.' (*The Telegraph*, 13 August 2010) [5.3]. '...a production [*The Persians*] that is both minimalist and massive in its scope and marvellous in its realisation' (*Hereford Times*, 13 August 2010)[5.5].

'The National Theatre of Wales turned Aeschylus's anti-war tragedy into one of the most thrilling events of the year by staging it in an army village high in the Brecon Beacons where soldiers are trained to fight in built-up areas. The result was sinister, ghostly and dramatically stunning.'

'The best British drama of 2010', (*The Telegraph*, 16 December 2010)[5.6]. 'Unlike Hamlet, he [*Coriolanus*] has little time to think. But once again, Pearson and Brookes have given us occasion to.' (*The Telegraph*, 10 August 2012)[5.7].

Audience responses were solicited by questionnaire (*The Persians*); and informally via the NTW on-line community. Examples of quote: 'First class imaginative staging of an apparently alien play in alien surroundings so produced and acted as to show its passion and relevance for

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today' [5.8]. 'After watching professional theatre for over 50 years, I was...starting to get tired...the theatrical creativity, acting, direction, organisation and technical competence in this production...was simply amazing' [5.9]

### Impact on the policy and practices of National Theatre Wales.

NTW is a Welsh Assembly Government initiative; in 'Rapid Response' (*New Welsh Review* 85, Autumn 2009 [5.10], the artistic director outlined his vision, intimating that the first 12-month programme would focus on a 'theatrical mapping' of the country: 'We will explore the land through theatre, and the theatre through the land. Each piece will be developed out of, and in response to, its location.' The successful fulfilment of this ambition in the dramaturgical form and siting of *The Persians* demonstrated the potential and feasibility of site-specific work within NTW's portfolio of presentational practices, as a means to address diverse audiences with challenging, innovative and participatory forms of theatre. The production played an important role in assisting the organization achieve its launch year goals: providing a platform and context for a new national theatre to demonstrate its ability to mount work – geographically dispersed, disparate in nature and of international standard; and helping the nascent organisation establish its viability and credibility [5.11]. It also enhanced the status of NTW's skill at successfully negotiating with a major public institution, the British Army. Located in a replica village constructed to enable the Army to train in urban warfare, *The Persians* required extended and detailed negotiations and practical collaboration with Defence Estates and its agency Landmark to address and settle complex site management issues: the planning, scheduling and implementation of scenographic construction; the organisation and execution of effective public access; and the successful realisation of rehearsals and performances in extreme circumstances, through the provision of access to existing infrastructures and resources. During final rehearsals, performers and crew lived in Army barracks in Sennybridge and ate in the mess.

*The Persians* was staged in an isolated, rural location and was produced by NTW in partnership with Theatr Brycheiniog, Brecon. It demonstrated that work of high standard can be created at site with the participation of local organisations and operatives, both professional and amateur: it involved ten volunteer stewards from the local area for each performance, contacted through existing infrastructures and via the NTW on-line community. It necessitated the detailed planning and implementation of procedures for the processing, marshalling and transportation of audiences. 'It is this ability to negotiate partnerships with seemingly intractable establishments, as well as gain the trust and support from local communities, that has helped the company establish itself.' (South East Wales, 18 January 2011).

As a direct result of the success of *The Persians*, Pearson, Brookes and Banham were invited to create a site-specific version of *Coriolanus* as NTW's major contribution to the World Shakespeare Festival/London 2012 [5.12], with a total production budget of £200,000 from public funding. It was produced in collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and staged in a large hanger at RAF St Athan in South Wales. The invitation demonstrates the impact of *The Persians* upon the programming policy of the Royal Shakespeare Company and London 2012, in demonstrating the potential and viability of innovative approaches to production within institutional contexts.

Such has been the significance of impact on policy that *Coriolanus* has been scheduled for future restaging in Stratford and in London; and NTW has recently commenced discussions with Pearson and Brookes to conceive a third production – a version of Christopher Logue's account of *The Iliad* [5.11]. This will further extend the reach of the production procedures developed in *The Persians* and *Coriolanus* – conceived from the outset in a form imminently suitable for restaging, and in anticipation of international co-production.

### Impact on professional theatre practice.

Pearson, Brookes and Banham have been acknowledged for their work through a number of professional awards:

\* Brookes and Banham received the Theatre Management Association's 'Best Design 2010' for *The Persians* [5.13]; and Kaite O'Reilly received the 'Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry 2010' for the commissioned script, created in consultation with Pearson. [5.14]

\* *Coriolanus* received the Theatre Critics of Wales Awards 2013 for 'Best Production', 'Best Actor', and 'Best Music and Sound'. [5.15]

\* The design for *Coriolanus* was selected for exhibition at World Stage Design 2013 (limited to 100

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physical exhibits from all those submitted) at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff in May 2013. [5.16]

These awards make two significant acknowledgements: first, that high quality, publicly engaged approaches to the conceptualisation and realisation of performance can emerge from an academic research context; secondly, that research-driven, innovative theatre practices – once confined to the realm of the theatrical fringe – can have significant critical and popular appeal when enacted within NTW. NTW here as a supportive and sympathetic realm of production expertise; and institutional framework dedicated to public engagement, significantly through the extended use of social media [5.17].

The casting of *The Persians* and *Coriolanus* was achieved through audition, resulting in a hybrid mix of Welsh and Wales-based actors from both mainstream and experimental backgrounds, and offering new professional opportunities and challenges, particularly with the inclusion of media, and in immersive relationships with audiences. And they augmented employability by including not only young trainee directors – the trainee on *The Persians* almost immediately secured the post of Associate Director at Sherman Cymru, Cardiff supported by a reference from Pearson – but also students from the main Welsh conservatoire for professional training – the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama – as both scenographic assistants to Banham, and as stand-ins for absent actors during rehearsals [5.16]

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

##### For Impact on cultural life: enriching public appreciation, understanding and imagination.

[5.1] Letter of corroboration: Arts Director, Arts Council of Wales

[5.2] BBC 4 *Front Row*, 11 August 2010 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00t8htr>

[5.3] *The Telegraph*, 16 December 2010. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/8194854/The-best-British-drama-of-2010.html>

[5.4] *The Observer*, 15 December 2012 <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/dec/15/best-theatre-2012-susannah-clapp>

[5.5] *Hereford Times*, 13 August 2010;

[http://www.herefordtimes.com/archive/2010/08/13/8330563.Explosive\\_drama\\_from\\_National\\_Theatre\\_of\\_Wales/](http://www.herefordtimes.com/archive/2010/08/13/8330563.Explosive_drama_from_National_Theatre_of_Wales/)

[5.6] *The Telegraph*, 13 August 2010; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/7944762/The-Persians-National-Theatre-of-Wales-review.html>

[5.7] *The Telegraph*, 10 August 2012 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9467499/Coriolanus-National-Theatre-Wales-RAF-St-Athan-review.html>

[5.8] Sedgman, K. 'Exploring the relationship between theatre's conception of its audience and actual audience reception [The National Theatre Wales Audience Research Project]' –raw data from *The Persians* questionnaires.

[5.9] [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9467499/Coriolanus-National-Theatre-Wales-RAF-St-Athan-review.html#disqus\\_thread](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9467499/Coriolanus-National-Theatre-Wales-RAF-St-Athan-review.html#disqus_thread)

##### For impact on the policy and practices of National Theatre Wales

[5.10] John McGrath, *New Welsh Review* 85, Autumn 2009

[5.11] Letter of corroboration: Artistic Director National Theatre Wales.

[5.12] Contact for corroboration: former Festival Director, World Shakespeare Festival (2012).

##### For impact on professional theatre practice

[5.13] *The Stage*, 8 November 2013 <http://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2010/11/leeds-london-and-northampton-share-honours-at-tma-awards/>

[5.14] Wales Online, 31 March 2011 <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/showbiz/welsh-poet-oreilly-wins-ted-1849667>

[5.15] *British Theatre Guide* 27 January 2013 <http://www.britishtheatreinfo.com/news/theatre-critics-of-wales-award-1181>

[5.16] Contact for corroboration: Lecturer in Design, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

[5.17] Letter of corroboration: Executive Director, Royal Court Theatre, London.