

Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Unit of Assessment: D35 Drama
Title of case study: Introducing the practice of 'contextual dramaturgies' to professional contemporary performance makers and audiences.
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Dr Tomlin has applied the findings of her theoretical research to the rehearsal room both by working dramaturgically with companies such as Point Blank, Tin Box, Nodding Dog, Little Earthquake and Shooting Fish and through her own creative practice as playwright in collaboration with other professional artists. Her research has helped to transform the processes of devising work, and has disseminated new ways of working to the artists involved, and, through their subsequent work, to their audiences in turn.</p> <p>This impact is demonstrated here through a site-specific production to which Dr Tomlin contributed in 2012, in which she developed new forms of creative practice which influenced the working processes and artistic methodologies of professional artists and enabled them to deliver innovative and politically relevant theatre to the general public. The primary impact benefitted the companies and professional artists with whom she collaborated; the secondary impact benefitted audiences of the performances, which numbered approximately 450 across 5 intimate venues throughout the UK.</p> <p>This impact is not merely a one-way dissemination of theoretical analysis to a receptive body of professional artists, but a practice-based research <i>process</i> undertaken <i>in collaboration</i> with the professional artists in question, thus forming a feedback loop: research – impact/application to practice – further research and experimentation – impact/application to practice. Practice-based research, in this sense, conducts both research and impact activity simultaneously.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The underpinning research was conducted by Dr Elizabeth Tomlin, who began working at the University of Birmingham in 2006 and is now a Senior Lecturer.</p> <p>Contemporary theatre is typically conceived in terms of a binary division between dramatic work (text-driven plays with characters, dialogue and the representation of a fictional world from which the audience are absent) and postdramatic work (performance in which text ranks alongside visual and physical vocabularies: it is characteristically narrated and addressed to the audience, the performers 'play themselves', and the audience is implicated in the present time of the event).</p> <p>This binary derives largely from Hans-Thies Lehmann's <i>Postdramatic Theatre</i> (1999), which establishes an ideological, rather than merely aesthetic, distinction between the two models. This encourages artists and companies to position themselves within one or the other, a tendency which was until very recently encouraged by industry support systems characterised by their support either of playwrights and plays, or of devised ensemble practice not driven by text.</p> <p>Tomlin's research undermines the binary between the two models: notably in her article 'And their stories' (see output R2 below), her foreword 'Dramatic Developments' (R4) and her monograph <i>Acts and Apparitions</i> (R1).</p> <p>Her article 'Make a Map' (R3) also argues that we need to erase the binary distinctions between the dramatic and postdramatic to enable a new kind of making process: 'contextual dramaturgies'. Drawing on the theories of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Tomlin argues that the process of each individual piece of work depends on a shifting set of artistic rules which is unique to that piece of work, and remains wholly provisional at each point in the process. She advocates the possibility of work that evolves using both dramatic and postdramatic strategies, rather than being limited by an either/or binary choice.</p> <p>Some artists already apply this way of working, but Tomlin brings a powerful theorisation to the practice in terms that can change the way that dramaturgical work is taught both within the</p>

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academy and within the professional theatre. This can help make the practice more available to emerging and existing artists. Her own application of this theory in the case study outlined below offers a practice-based dissemination that has directly impacted on the working processes of the artists involved and is communicated in the rehearsal room via the language of practice.

It is very complex in this mode of dissemination to attach specific impacts to specific research insights; in the rehearsal space you draw on a bank of theoretical knowledge to respond to the particular problems and issues that arise, rather than imposing specific theoretical insights onto the working process. However, the research focus that has informed the impact here can be summarised as exploring the theatrical/political potential of the interplay between the fictional world of the drama and the 'real time' event of the postdramatic performance, when both, apparently contradictory, frameworks co-exist.

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

- R1) *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory 1990-2010*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) (Tomlin also received an AHRC research fellowship for the writing of the monograph which was peer reviewed at the highest possible rating of 6 and awarded a grant of £33,000)
- R2) 'And their stories fell apart even as I was telling them: Poststructuralist Performance and the no-longer-dramatic playtext' in *Performance Research*, 14:1 (2009)
- R3) "'Make a Map, not a Tracing": Contextual Dramaturgies and New Writing' *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 23:2 (2013). All the above to be submitted to REF 2014.
- R4) 'Foreword: Dramatic Developments' in V. Angelaki (ed.) *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). This foreword will be a reserve output for the REF.
- R5) Documentation of *The Pool Game* at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUDs6oCddm4&feature=plcp> (*The Pool Game* was awarded an Arts Council grant of £17,140 for the making and touring of the work).

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

The Pool Game was written by Tomlin, funded by Arts Council England, and supported in development by mac Birmingham and Point Blank Theatre (Sheffield). It was produced by the artistic collective, Geiger Counter, in collaboration with artistic director Di Sherlock, sound designer Andy Booth, and performers Vern Griffiths and Joseph Macnab. Tomlin contributed by writing the work-in-progress script, discussing dramaturgical decisions in rehearsal and post-rehearsal with the director, and writing the final script for the 2012 performances.

What kind of impact?

Tomlin's performance text and dramaturgical partnership with the director contributed decisively to the creation of new forms of theatrical practice. *The Pool Game* generated new ways of thinking in its successful fusion of a dramatic (narrative fictional world/character based/linear) within a postdramatic framework (direct address/ real-time eventness/episodic montage). Additionally, this new model opened up the possibilities of combining the 'complete/pre-rehearsed' dramatic narrative with the postdramatic emphasis on unknowability and present time action, by establishing the central conceit of a dramatic narrative which is ultimately driven by a live game of pool with an indeterminate conclusion (see source 1 below).

How was this achieved?

The audience took part in a game of killer pool at the beginning, with one of the actors working as host and compere, utilising the contemporary trend for participation in postdramatic practice in which the audience are fully acknowledged in the time and space of the performance event (rather than being spectators of a dramatic fiction), and are involved in the action with actors (rather than characters). However, the piece succeeded in fusing this with a predominantly dramatic and character-based narrative model. By positioning the audience throughout both as audience (postdramatic event) and jurors (within the dramatic fiction); the performance was able to work simultaneously on both dramatic and postdramatic levels; and the performers were able to exist simultaneously in both their dramatic and character-based roles within the fiction and their roles as

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performers speaking to a watching audience. Both were effectively made interchangeable by the script, which fused audience/jurors as one, in order to induce reflection on the passivity of both (and so transmit from their 'fictional' role to their 'real' one) in relation to acts of theatre and acts of political resistance in the world beyond.

How did this impact on the professional artists?

This required the performers to create their own strategies for dealing with the duality of the audience as both 'real' and 'fictional'; and balancing the determinacy of the dramatic text against the indeterminacy of the pool game.

"Due to the fluid nature of the movement of the balls on the table, there could be no solid 'blocking' of the action, speeches, altercations and revelations could happen in a different place every performance, Stage Left or Right, in front or behind the table, we were where the game dictated we needed to be, this could very easily have an impact on the power and effectiveness of a moment. To ensure the emotional journey of the piece still played, it was necessary for us to be able to create images onstage at a moment's notice, we couldn't dictate where would be, so we had to keep the table balanced, moving in relation to each other and the game, so that when the confrontation occurred, we had the space to convey what was necessary."

(source 2)

It further required the director to invent strategies to create a stage-world which enabled a coherent fusion of real world and dramatic fiction.

"I am keen to use similar strategies in my own future work; they chime with my own significant experience as a performer in site-specific practice and have extended, for me, the possibilities of genuinely integrated and productive audience interaction within the framework of a fictional and linear dramatic narrative. Working with Liz on her use of sound to underline the different 'worlds' of the piece also furthered my personal exploration of the use of soundscape to create internal and external landscapes."

(source 3)

In this way, as described in the summary section above, the impact of this practice-based research collaboration was not merely a one-way dissemination of theoretical analysis to a receptive body of artists, but a process undertaken in collaboration with those artists which produced outcomes that both fed back into my own research and also fed into the direct learning experience of the director and associate artists, who could subsequently take this methodology and its insights into future professional practice. Additional impact was achieved through the audience's experience of the performance as a dissemination of the insights made possible through the practice-based research process.

How did this impact on the audience?

The intention was to encourage the audience to transfer their fictional role as jurors – charged by the piece with passive complicity with the 'rules of the game' – to their 'real' role as audience members who were assumed to hold political views which were highly critical of the rules of the capitalist game that is being played out at this moment in history, yet who effectively did nothing about it. In a Brechtian sense the piece attempted to 'make strange' to the audience things that they took for granted, in a way that would initiate changed ways of thinking which, in turn, would initiate action:

'spread a new light and made me think differently about how I engage with politics'
(Barnsley, graduate, aged 18-25)

'it heightened my thought process' (Barnsley, choreographer, aged 25-35)

'it emphasised the political questions we should ask today. Shouldn't just accept what we are given' (Leeds, nurse, aged 45-55)

'made me think about our casual acceptance of bank accounts and how we don't question why we have them' (Sheffield, project manager, aged 35-45)

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'reminded me about stuff I ignore – ouch!' (Sheffield, administrator, aged 35-45)
 'I still remember the graphic description of the petrol overflowing out of the car; that made me think differently about how easily I fill up my car with petrol and how little I am concerned about how that is affecting the wider world'. (Birmingham, teacher, 25-35)
 (all source 4).

The success of this fusion of dramatic and postdramatic is clear from audience feedback on the piece, showing that this functioned in the way that it was intended, and generated new ways of thinking, both about creative practice and the social, political and economic context in which we live:

'The incorporation of the game of chance/skill into the larger discussion was clever' (Barnsley, Educator, aged 25-35)

'Really engaging. Liked the device of two familiar settings but tilted (pool and court) (Barnsley, drama facilitator/stage manager, aged 25-35)

'Involving the audience from the off set the tone for the later involvement' (Huddersfield, theatre maker, aged 25-35)

'Even though I do not follow or like politics I loved the mixture of the game of pool with politics. Left you think about a lot and that's what makes a show amazing, the after thought' (Huddersfield, student, aged 18-25)

'I really liked the pool game as a framing devise for the debate within the piece; it leant the work a coherence that suggested to me the interconnectivity of the various elements'.(London, teacher, aged 25-35)

'I particularly enjoyed how the weight of the topics, philosophy, fiction and the games circumstances contrasted to the trivial comedy, as seen in the 1st actors persona, the off putting 'game showey' music and kitsch lighting up of the judge. The environment of the senate house really added to this effect with its oppressive atmosphere of judgement'. (London, actor 18-25) (all source 4)

Reach of the impact:

The Pool Game previewed at MAC, Birmingham on 2-3 March 2011, before platform dates in limited audience, site specific venues in June 2012: Buckley Lecture Theatre, Huddersfield (7 June) – audience 50; Sheffield Cathedral (13-15 June) – audience 100; Senate House, London (18-19 June) – audience 200, HUB, Leeds (28-29 June) – audience 50, Barnsley Civic Theatre (30 June) – audience 50; and it is now available to view via filmed documentation. This was a newly formed company without an existing following, but the Pool Game website (source 5) nevertheless got 1,900 views in 2012, with 53 views on June 18th, the busiest day. (The independent annual report with these figures can be found via source 6).

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

- [1] Documentation of *The Pool Game* at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUDs6oCddm4&feature=plcp>
- [2] Factual statement provided by Actor on *The Pool Game*
- [3] Factual statement provided by Director of *The Pool Game*
- [4] Collated audience feedback (available on request or on website
<http://geigercountertheatre.com/>)
- [5] Website: <http://geigercountertheatre.com>
- [6] Blog hits registered at: <http://geigercountertheatre.com/2012/annual-report/>
- [7] Factual statement provided by assistant dramaturg on *The Pool Game*