

Backstage Space: The Place of the Performer

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

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University of Sydney
2006

Abstract

This thesis presents a systematic investigation of the backstage spaces of theatres in the city of Sydney, Australia, combining the documentation of eight specific theatre buildings with ethnographic accounts of performers' activities within them. As the title of the thesis suggests, my focus throughout is to better understand the 'place' of performers, the ways in which performers inhabit certain physical, social, and imaginative realms. Through this thesis I assess the impact of backstage spaces on performers' work processes, their performances, and their own understandings of what it is to be a performer.

To undertake this assessment I conduct a tripartite survey of the backstage spaces afforded performers, taking into consideration 'perceived' space (space as it is empirically measured), 'conceived' space (space as it is represented), and 'lived' space (space as it is experienced). Approaching this survey via Edward Casey's understanding of 'place,' my analysis is informed by a range of theories, notably, spatial syntax analysis, discourse analysis, and phenomenology.

Through this thesis I develop two overarching and interconnected arguments. The first is that theatrical performance is profoundly affected by the features of backstage support spaces and by performers' backstage practices. Building on this, the second is that a study of backstage spaces offers a particularly apposite approach to further understanding the 'place' of theatrical performers. I contend that the backstage spaces performers inhabit can be characterised by their very poverty and that these poor conditions testify to a widespread ignorance and ambivalence on the part of society at large towards performers' needs. Furthermore, noting the way in which performers valorise their own abilities to compromise and adapt, I argue that backstage areas largely inform performers' dominant discourses of professionalism and worth. Ultimately, I identify the 'place' of the performer as one of flux that necessitates the constant negotiation of significant tensions.

Acknowledgements

My appreciation and gratitude go to Gay McAuley and Paul Dwyer for their generous provision of time, expert guidance, and encouragement as my supervisors. Likewise, my thanks go to all in the Department of Performance Studies who have made the processes of research and writing so stimulating and enjoyable; to Ian, Russell, Tim, Lowell, Laura, and Amanda; and to fellow postgrads Jenny, Jac, Daniel, Mark, Paul, Stuart, Kate, Kathryn, Ariana, and Camilla. My thanks, too, go to the Environment, Behaviour and Society Research Group within the Faculty of Architecture for their valuable advice during the latter stages of this research.

This thesis is drawn from the experiences of theatre practitioners and has only been possible due to the access and insight they have graciously provided. The fabulous Kate Gaul deserves special mention, as do Malcolm C. Cooke, Chris Yates, and John Bell. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the vast array of performers and technical crew – whose names may or may not actually appear on the pages of this thesis – who willingly engaged with my research interests; who gave thoughtful, open responses to my questions; and without whose assistance this thesis would not have been written.

An Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship provided by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training funded three-and-a-half years of research towards this thesis. The School of English, Art History, Film, and Media within the Faculty of Arts provided additional funding for the construction of the accompanying CD-ROM. I would especially like to thank Andrew Beeston and Robert Lincolne at www.brownbox.net.au for all the work they undertook in constructing such a stylish and functional CD-ROM.

Thanks to my family and friends for their support and encouragement throughout, and to those faithful few who provided essential editorial eyes; to Rhonda Filmer, Roslyn Goddard, and Naomi Miller, and to Shamus Toomey who proofread everything.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you to Anthea, to whom I dedicate this thesis.

Soli Deo Gloria

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