

1

Introduction

This thesis, over eight chapters, presents a systematic investigation of the backstage spaces of theatres in the city of Sydney, Australia, combining documentation of specific theatre buildings with ethnographic accounts of performers' practices 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. Central to this thesis is an assessment of the impact of backstage spaces on performers' work processes, their performances, and ultimately their own understandings of what it is to be a performer.

In recent decades, the humanities and social sciences "have been experiencing an unprecedented spatial turn."¹ This turn has influenced a "move towards more culturally and geographically nuanced work, sensitive to difference and specificity, and thus to the contingencies of event and locale."² Within the associated academic fields of Theatre Studies and Performance Studies this has been manifest through increased attention being directed to the function of space and place in the production

¹ Edward Soja, "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination," in *Human Geography Today*, ed. Doreen Massey, John Allen, and Philip Sarre (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 261.

² Denis Cosgrove, "Landscape and Landschaft," *German Historical Institute Bulletin*, no. 35 (2004): 57.

and reception of theatrical performance, both that which occurs in theatre buildings and that which is site-specific. Despite this, little sustained attention has been directed towards backstage space and the use of such space by performers. It is my contention that this represents a significant lacuna in our knowledge of the complex interrelations between performers, the performances they create, and the spaces and places in which they create such performances.

In this introduction I first provide evidence for my assertion that both backstage spaces and the activities of performers within them have been largely overlooked, before detailing the various approaches that have been taken by the scholars and practitioners who have studied, documented, and theorised theatre buildings and other established places of performance. I then justify why backstage spaces should be the focus of academic attention, before outlining the research I have undertaken. I conclude this chapter with a statement of my aims and an overview of the thesis itself.

Scholars studying theatre and performance practice have tended to ignore backstage spaces and the various activities they house because the focus of their attention has been on those areas that have traditionally been open to non-practitioners. While the study of rehearsal processes has opened some avenues for research, Richard Schechner's observation remains pertinent: "In limiting their investigations mostly to what happens during the performance itself, scholars are following modern Euro-American theatrical conventions: You don't go backstage unless you're part of the show."³ Coupled with this, John Lutterbie has identified that much writing about the experience of performers has been done "using the categories of reception, of what the audience experiences."⁴ Writing from the implicit perspective of spectators, scholars have often failed to take into account the embodied experience and perspective of performers.

Richard Schechner has long emphasised the processual nature of performance, countering unduly narrow definitions that focus only on its public aspects. In

³ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 19.

⁴ John Lutterbie, "Phenomenology and the Dramaturgy of Space and Place," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* XVI, no. 1 (2001): 129.

Between Theater and Anthropology, Schechner argued for a view of performance as a ‘time-space sequence’ made up of seven parts: “training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down and aftermath.”⁵ From this initial formulation Schechner identified a distinct lack of academic attention towards certain parts of the performance process: “Generally, scholars have paid attention to the show, not to the whole seven-part sequence.”⁶ Because of this, “too little study has been made of how people – both spectators and performers – approach and leave performances.”⁷ Such selective attention is also present amongst practitioners themselves who “have investigated training, rehearsals, and performances, but have slighted workshops, warm-up, cool-down and aftermath.”⁸

This lack of attention, on the part of both academics and practitioners, towards those aspects of the performance sequence that sit adjacent to the public performance itself, is coupled with a lack of attention towards the spaces in which these activities occur. In her study *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, Gay McAuley has remarked that to write about the backstage or ‘practitioner space’ of any theatre is “difficult as it has never been systematically documented in the past and is, still to this day, regarded as private by practitioners.”⁹ Information about backstage spaces is therefore “tantalizingly absent from the historical record,”¹⁰ leading to a situation where the backstage remains “significantly the least documented, least analysed, least theorized area of theatre space.”¹¹ McAuley’s short examination of backstage ‘practitioner space’ is one of the few instances of actual investigation into the wider issues that stem from performers’ inhabitation of the backstage areas of western theatre buildings.¹² Noting that the need for privacy and seclusion on the part of

⁵ Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 16. More recently, Schechner has extended the sequence to include ten parts grouped under three headings: under the heading of ‘Proto-performance’ Schechner lists ‘Training,’ ‘Workshop’ and ‘Rehearsal’; under the heading of ‘Performance’ he lists ‘Warm-up,’ ‘Public performance,’ ‘Events/contexts sustaining the public performance’ and ‘Cool down’; under the heading of ‘Aftermath’ he lists ‘Critical responses,’ ‘Archives’ and ‘Memories.’ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 191.

⁶ Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 16.

⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 169.

⁸ Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 16.

⁹ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² The main focus of McAuley’s book is “the ways in which space functions in practice in the performance experience and in the construction of meaning by spectators.” *Ibid.*, 8. Her brief treatment of the backstage is but one part of a larger project.

practitioners is understandable, McAuley suggests that this also serves “to hide the sordid nature of the working conditions provided for actors and production staff.”¹³ Noting, too, the lack of documentary photographic evidence of such sordid conditions, McAuley suggests, “It is as though there is a tacit agreement among everyone concerned to ignore the fact that the conditions in which actors work are frequently shabby, even dirty, drafty and unacceptably spartan.”¹⁴

That the backstage spaces of theatres have been largely overlooked is strange, given that a wide variety of scholars and practitioners have studied, documented, and theorised theatre buildings. Indeed, the degree of intensive study afforded to theatre buildings reflects their status as “one of the most persistent architectural objects in the history of western culture.”¹⁵ The writings of the Roman architect Vitruvius are foundational in this field and his priorities have been influential. In his writings, Vitruvius concentrated on describing the most advantageous arrangement of spectators and actors, and the requirements for good acoustics.¹⁶ Later prominent writers of treatises on theatres, especially Fabrizio Carini Motta and George Saunders, reflected Vitruvius’ concerns by continuing to concentrate on acoustic issues. In response to the development of stage spectacle, their works also discuss spectatorial sightlines.¹⁷

The changing nature of stage and auditorium design has been the focus of the overwhelming majority of writings dealing with theatre buildings, namely, those that detail the historical development of (usually western) theatres and their attendant technology. References to backstage spaces in these accounts are infrequent and, when included, focus largely on the development of stage machinery and the impact of new technologies. Eminent examples of this historical-survey approach include works by George C. Izenour, Richard and Helen Leacroft, Donald C. Mullin, and

¹³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 6.

¹⁶ Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Ingrid D. Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Vitruvius’s writings on theatre design are found in Book V of his *Ten Books*.

¹⁷ Fabrizio Carini Motta, *The Theatrical Writings of Fabrizio Carini Motta*, trans. Orville K. Larson (1676; reprint, with an introduction by Orville K. Larson, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987); George Saunders, *A Treatise on Theatres* (1790; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom Inc., 1968).

Richard Southern.¹⁸ Southern's interest is in the development of what he calls "theatre form,"¹⁹ while Mullin lays out a "generalized portrait of past playhouses."²⁰ The Leacrofts' accounts bear a similarity to Izenour's mountainous texts with both providing numerous isometric drawings to aid in the comparison of different historical theatres. The Leacrofts' drawings are, however, more usefully contextualised through references to historical performance practices. In contrast to this, Izenour focuses entirely on the physical characteristics of stages and auditoria; his accounts eschew any discussion of social context or actual performance for extensive discussion of engineering problems.²¹

In addition to treatises and historical surveys, a third important approach to the study and understanding of theatre buildings is represented in the technical and planning manuals that detail the process of designing and constructing new theatres. Jo Mielziner's *The Shapes of Our Theatre* is an influential American text that, while championing the use of multi-purpose flexible theatres, also provides guidance on planning procedures. Roderick Ham's *Theatre Planning* and Ian Appleton's *Building for the Performing Arts*, both published in Britain, take the form of handbooks, offering less partisan design advice.²² All three texts are based on their authors' prior professional theatre experience and are written in response to the increase in new, and often large-scale, theatre construction that has occurred in Britain, the United States, and, indeed, Australia, since the end of the Second World War. Such theatres have often been built on behalf of public institutions and government bodies in response to

¹⁸ George C. Izenour, *Roofed Theaters of Classical Antiquity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Izenour, *Theater Design*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Izenour, *Theater Technology*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Richard Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973); Richard Leacroft and Helen Leacroft, *Theatre and Playhouse: An Illustrated Survey of Theatre Buildings from Ancient Greece to the Present Day* (London: Methuen, 1984); Donald C. Mullin, *The Development of the Playhouse: A Survey of Theatre Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970); and Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962; reprint, 1977).

¹⁹ Southern uses the term "theatre form" to refer to the varying spatial forms which theatrical performance has taken. *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*, 17.

²⁰ Mullin, *The Development of the Playhouse: A Survey of Theatre Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present*, vi. Mullin's underlying theory of the relationship between performance and playhouse is particularly useful: "A playhouse is a living organism, inseparable from the plays produced within it. One affects the other in every way imaginable." *Ibid.*, xvii.

²¹ For Izenour, the end of theatre design is "to be seen and to be heard, and to see and to hear." *Theater Design*, xxix.

²² Jo Mielziner, *The Shapes of Our Theatre* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1970); Ian Appleton, *Buildings for the Performing Arts: A Design and Development Guide* (Oxford: Butterworth, 1996); Roderick Ham, *Theatre Planning* (London: The Architectural Press, 1972).

increased post-war public subsidy for the arts (and, in the case of Australia, the commencement of public subsidy for the arts with the founding of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust in 1954). Technical and planning manuals have become necessary in the late twentieth century as those responsible for initiating and designing new theatre building projects are often unfamiliar with the needs of practitioners and are often not directly involved in the operation of venues once they are built. Ham and Appleton's texts therefore offer specific technical advice on a range of topics, including the needs of different art forms; the size, type and spatial organisation of venues; and electrical, technological, and safety considerations.

Critical appraisals of contemporary theatre design and use form a fourth approach to the study of theatre buildings. Most recently, works like David Wiles' *A Short History of Western Performance Space*, itself ostensibly an historical survey, have criticised theatre buildings altogether; Wiles condemns them as "spatial machines that grind out predetermined theatrical meanings."²³ Such an attack reflects a perception shared by many practitioners and scholars that traditional western theatre structures are moribund, while 'found' spaces and site-specific work offer more freedom. Stephen Joseph's earlier *Actor and Architect* provides an insight into the concerns of British practitioners in the mid 1960s when "the generally accepted concept of a theatre" was even then "being held in question."²⁴ Indeed, Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* offered an explicit rejection of institutionalised theatrical venues.²⁵ Brook's influential ideas have added weight to Joseph's opinion that drama is ephemeral, "theatres must have a limited life," and in theatre design, "[e]fficiency is more important than permanence."²⁶

Critical appraisals that explore the connections between contemporary theatre design and broader social, economic, and political concerns offer interesting insights into the

²³ David Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4. For similar critiques of theatre architecture, see also, Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 161-4; Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), 50-51; and Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 108-9.

²⁴ Stephen Joseph, *Actor and Architect* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), ix.

²⁵ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: McGibbon & Kee, 1968).

²⁶ Joseph, *Actor and Architect*, 27. For an account of the way Brook's artistic practice since the 1960s has involved a profound interrogation of theatre space, see Andrew Todd and Jean-Guy Lecat, *The Open Circle: Peter Brook's Theatre Environments* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

way theatres reflect their immediate cultural context. Richard Mulryne and Margaret Shewring's *Making Space for Theatre* casts a wide net over post-war British theatre design, combining documentation of theatres with short commentaries by actors, directors, designers, and venue managers.²⁷ For Mulryne and Shewring, "the development of our theatres over the last decades, perhaps inevitably, perhaps by conscious choice, represents large changes in our understandings of our social and cultural moment."²⁸ From an Australian perspective, the work of Ross Thorne represents an important documentary source. While Thorne's comprehensive study *Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905* takes the same approach as the earlier historical surveys I have mentioned, his account demonstrates an appreciation of the personalities and histories of those responsible for the construction of early Australian theatres, as well as the influence of social and political constraints, an evolving regulatory context, and the influence of contemporary developments in English theatre.²⁹ Thorne's work demonstrates that theatre architecture provides a "good source of evidence for social change and change in community expectations."³⁰ In his later work Thorne has investigated the plethora of post-war Australian performing arts centres in relation to the "complex interaction of cultural, social, economic, and historical factors" that surrounded their creation.³¹

The seminal works of Marvin Carlson and Iain Mackintosh explicitly address that which is implicit in many of the sources I have described; both authors base their work on the understanding that theatre architecture is vitally important in the overall experience and reception of theatrical performance and the construction of meaning from that experience. Carlson utilises a semiotic approach in his studies, while Mackintosh delves into the more difficult consideration of how architecture might direct a flow of energy from practitioner to spectator. In *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Carlson illuminates how theatre architecture

²⁷ Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring, eds., *Making Space for Theatre: British Architecture and Theatre since 1958* (Stratford-upon-Avon: Mulryne and Shewring Ltd., 1995).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹ Ross Thorne, *Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905: From the Time of the First Settlement to the Arrival of Cinema* (Sydney: Architectural Research Foundation, University of Sydney, 1971).

³⁰ Ross Thorne, "Person-Environment Conditions That Inspired Regulatory and Other Changes to Building Design from the 19th into the Middle 20th Centuries: The Case of Theatre Design," *People and Physical Environment Research*, no. 57 (2002): 39.

³¹ Ross Thorne, "Performing Arts Centres: The Phenomenon, and What Has Influenced Their Being," in *Australian Theatre Design*, ed. Kim Spinks (Sydney: Australian Production Designers Association of NSW, 1992), 3.

frames theatrical performance, and how “the entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location in the city, are all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning of its experience.”³² In *Architecture, Actor and Audience* Iain Mackintosh’s central theme is that “theatre architecture is *more* than the frame to a picture.”³³ Mackintosh documents past and present theories of theatre design, and offers guidelines for future designers on the basis that “theatre architecture is one of the most vital ingredients of the theatrical experience and one of the least understood.”³⁴

This brief summary of the different approaches to studying, documenting, and theorising theatre buildings demonstrates that the overriding focus of scholars and practitioners continues to be the performance space itself, particularly the relationship between stage and auditorium, performer and spectator. What is consistently absent is any sustained attention to backstage spaces, and reference to the experience of performers. Carlson and Mackintosh’s otherwise excellent texts provide useful illustrations of this point. At no time does Carlson engage in any study of how the elements of theatre design he identifies (audience arrangements, public spaces, physical appearance, and location in the city) might also be significant in performers’ understandings. Admittedly, Carlson does note that actors utilise backstage spaces to “ready themselves physically and psychologically for their upcoming contact with the audience,”³⁵ and that actors ascertain their own status from the size and position of their allocated dressing rooms. But that is all. Mackintosh is particularly explicit in his choice to focus only on the arrangement of stage and auditorium, and his rationale for doing so is revealing. For Mackintosh, the backstage is one of those “vitaly important but essentially secondary spaces” which can simply be learnt about from reading “plenty of handbooks.”³⁶ By contrast, it is the performance space where “the mystery takes place.”³⁷ From Mackintosh’s comments it seems that backstage areas are too mundane, too quotidian to sustain investigation, especially in comparison to the ‘mystery’ of the stage. In reviewing many of the studies considered here, McAuley

³² Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, 2.

³³ [Italics added] Iain Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁵ Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, 133.

³⁶ Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

has concluded that the exclusion of backstage spaces indicates the extent to which many studies “are in fact concerned with the building as aesthetic object rather than with its function in a complex social process.”³⁸ What is needed is a study that not only considers backstage spaces, but does so in a way that illuminates the social processes that take place there.

As is evidenced in Carlson’s text, it would be disingenuous to suggest that there is no mention at all in these texts about backstage spaces and activities. Rather, references are made, but in ways that are short and fleeting. Amongst such references, the most recurrent theme is that the backstage spaces found in theatres provide poor conditions for the practitioners who must work within them. Ham writes of British theatres: “Many of the older theatres are so poorly provided with accommodation for the cast that actors have had to put up with near slum conditions which would hardly be tolerated in other industries.”³⁹ Similarly, director Tyrone Guthrie, while admitting that star dressing rooms are often well equipped, has highlighted that in many theatres “the lower classes [...] just work in concentration camps, three floors below ground, heaped like sardines into a totally unequipped cellar.”⁴⁰ In an Australian context, Ross Thorne and Paul Frame’s 1972 study of country theatres in New South Wales found that the majority of backstage areas were “unacceptable for drama, opera and ballet,”⁴¹ and that forty-five per cent of country theatres possessed dressing rooms *without* toilet and shower facilities.⁴²

The lack of sustained academic attention towards backstage areas, combined with the apparently poor conditions often endured there, makes a study of such spaces necessary. Space and place serve a vitally important function in the experience of theatrical performance, and *all* the spaces involved in the creation of performance need to be accounted for, especially those which performers utilise for preparation. As

³⁸ McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 9.

³⁹ Ham, *Theatre Planning*, 175. More recently, in 2003, a report on the dilapidated condition of many of London’s West End theatres stated: “Dressing rooms and spaces for technical staff often exhibit conditions that would not be tolerated in any other industry.” The Theatres Trust, “Act Now! Modernising London’s West End Theatres,” (London: The Theatres Trust, 2003), 13.

⁴⁰ Tyrone Guthrie, “Theatre at Minneapolis,” in *Actor and Architect*, ed. Stephen Joseph (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), 33.

⁴¹ Ross Thorne and Paul Frame, *Country Theatre: Aspects of Audience, Financial Support, and the Buildings Used with Particular Reference to N.S.W* (Sydney: Dept. of Architecture, University of Sydney, 1972), 74.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 80.

Schechner has noted, “surrounding a show are special observances, practices and rituals that lead into the performance and away from it,”⁴³ which effectively create “a nest built from the agreement to gather at a specific time and place, to perform – to do something agreed on – and to disperse once the performance is over.”⁴⁴ A sufficient analysis of this ‘nest’ requires that *all* aspects of it, especially those which are most hidden from view, be taken into account. At present this is not the case.

Theatrical performance also involves physical work, much of which remains unseen. Such work, especially that of performers themselves, needs to be accounted for if we are to better understand what it is that occurs in the act of performing. Indeed, for Alice Rayner, “Labour is what makes the event happen.”⁴⁵ In Rayner’s view, “The exclusion of that labour from critical attention replicates the exclusions of the body from philosophy and metaphysics.”⁴⁶ As well as impoverishing our own understanding of theatrical performance, such an exclusion also has “emphatically ethical consequences.”⁴⁷ To rectify this requires an engagement with the backstage labour of performers, their preparations, their transitions from offstage to on, and their cool-down afterwards. It requires a consideration of the often long hours performers spend backstage. Another of Schechner’s statements is instructive: if the key questions in the study of performance relate to “the living performance event when looked at from the viewpoint of the human beings involved in the performance,”⁴⁸ then performers’ perceptions, lived experiences, and labours must be taken into account.

British actor Simon Callow’s description of the backstage in his published memoir *Being An Actor*, points to the potential value of examining performers’ perceptions. In particular, Callow reveals an apparent discrepancy between performers’ perceptions of backstage spaces and the often poor conditions experienced there. Of the backstage, Callow writes:

⁴³ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Alice Rayner, "Rude Mechanicals and the Specters of Marx," *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002): 554.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 32.

The division between the auditorium, with its velvet and gilt, or even its mauve and grey concrete, and the functional stage, with its ropes and wires, its steep black brick walls, its little purple lights and tables full of props, wheels and weights, staircases leading down into the bowels of the building, and ladders leading up into the giddy flies, remains a potent phenomenon: the romance of work, the jujū of craft – and all secret. Our kingdom.⁴⁹

In this description, the functional stage blurs into a romanticised realm of hidden spaces and objects, a place of craft secrets. No mention is made of the possibility that such an environment could be ‘shabby’ or ‘sordid.’ Through its contrast with the more public space of the auditorium, this space is somehow experienced as a “potent phenomenon.” Callow’s comments are not isolated; they ring true with the statements of other performers. How might the aforementioned shabby and utilitarian aspects of the backstage be reconciled with this romantic notion of a ‘secret kingdom’? Taking into account the framing effect of theatre architecture, McAuley has commented that practitioners’ experiences are “framed as fundamentally utilitarian,”⁵⁰ with an underlying message that “the actor’s profession is not very highly regarded by society at large.”⁵¹ How might her interpretation be reconciled with the more celebratory tone of Callow’s account?

In other cultural contexts, backstage spaces and activities are not held in such low regard; a study of such spaces would be perceived as directly relevant to the understanding of the performance itself. Matazo Nakamura, in his account of life as a Japanese Kabuki actor, details the extent to which the backstage, or *Gakuya*, “nourishes and breathes life into every performance.”⁵² For Nakamura, “the backstage of a kabuki theatre reveals a world where all the artists and craftsmen have a very firm idea of where they belong.”⁵³ The classical Indian art forms of Kutiyattam and Kathakali also place great emphasis on pre-performance rituals; in addition to the hours taken by performers to put on costumes and apply makeup, the tradition of performing in temple precincts renders such activities noticeably more significant.

⁴⁹ Simon Callow, *Being an Actor* (London: Penguin, 1988), 182.

⁵⁰ McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵² Matazo Nakamura, *Kabuki: Backstage, Onstage*, trans. Mark Oshima (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1990), 71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 37.

In this thesis I undertake a systematic investigation of backstage spaces with the aim of formulating a more thorough understanding of the ‘place’ of performers. Actors and performers, more so than the production crew they share backstage spaces with, have, in the west, historically found themselves regarded with a certain level of suspicion and unease, often finding themselves “on the margin of society.”⁵⁴ To study the backstage environments as a way of focusing on the position of performers is therefore pertinent. Given the need I have already noted, to both document actual backstage spaces and to augment any documentation with ethnographically informed accounts of performers’ activities, I have limited the scope of my investigations to the city of Sydney, Australia.

Over the following seven chapters, this thesis contributes to current understandings of performers and performance in four main ways. Firstly, it documents theatre buildings and presents accounts of performers’ lived experiences in the backstage areas of those buildings. Secondly, it examines how the backstage areas of theatres might reveal wider societal attitudes towards actors and performers. Thirdly, it outlines how performers’ understandings of their own role, identity and worth might be affected by the places provided for them to work in. Finally, it also considers how performances might be affected by the places in which actors prepare and rehearse.

To carry out this research task raises the question of how humans interact with the environments in which they find themselves. In the following chapter I articulate the theoretical framework that has guided my research. Beginning with Edward Casey’s phenomenological approach to ‘place,’ and informed by the work of Edward Soja, I stress the necessity of considering ‘perceived’ space (space as it is empirically measured), ‘conceived’ space (space as it is represented), and ‘lived’ space (space as it is experienced). I conclude with a discussion of the research design I have adopted and the practical difficulties I encountered.

In Chapter Three I critique the dominant semiotic understanding of the relationship between a given theatre and the performances that take place within it, arguing for the

⁵⁴ Mendel Kohansky, *The Disreputable Profession: The Actor in Society*, ed. Robert H. Walker (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), 6.

metaphor of a theatre as a 'house' rather than as a 'frame.' I then define the term 'backstage' before presenting what I call 'A Topography of Practitioner Space,' my extensive documentation of the backstage spaces in eight Sydney theatres. Photographs of these theatres are supplied on an accompanying CD-ROM as Appendix A, while building plans are supplied on paper as Appendix B.

Chapters Four and Five build on the documentation provided in Chapter Three and together present an account of performers' lived experiences in the backstage spaces of theatres. In Chapter Four I examine performers' experiences of spatio-temporal journeying and the practices of inhabitation they engage in backstage, namely, preparing, monitoring, and negotiating social environments. In this chapter I argue that despite the prevalingly transient and 'hermetic' conditions within which performers work, their backstage practices evidence their desire for a more 'hestial' mode of inhabitation, for continuity, sustainability, control, inclusion, and belonging. In Chapter Five I analyse those areas commonly referred to as 'the wings,' the fraught spaces of transition between offstage and onstage, where performers encounter the debilitating effects of stage fright and must negotiate the tension between their desire for control, and the need for them to submit to the requirements of the performance at hand.

In Chapters Six and Seven I contextualise the accounts provided in Four and Five by presenting case studies of performers' experiences working within two prominent Sydney theatres. In Chapter Six I document the performance sequence of two separate productions at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre noting, amongst other things, how performers' understandings of their own position in the field of theatrical performance are informed through their interactions with the places in which they create performances. I argue that the 'who' and the 'where' of theatrical performance are mutually constitutive. In Chapter Seven I analyse the problems practitioners encounter whilst working within the impressive edifice of the Sydney Opera House. Detailing the problematic history of the Sydney Opera House's design and construction, and examining the contemporary experience of practitioners, I argue that the Sydney Opera House is a paradigmatic example of Australian ambivalence towards the practical needs of theatrical practitioners.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, I offer some concluding remarks, reflecting on the theoretical questions that have been raised through the thesis, offering design principles by which a 'nobler approach' to backstage design might be pursued, and arguing that the conditions in which actors work are evidence of an underlying ignorance and ambivalence towards performers on the part of wider society. I conclude with a discussion of how performers' discourses of professionalism and worth are informed by their backstage experiences.