

# 6

## A Place for Theatre: Performing at Belvoir Street

Not that I'm trying to make any grand claims, but there is in our space at Belvoir St something that allows a wonderful complication of empathy ...

*Neil Armfield*<sup>1</sup>

The built environment has great inertia and since it becomes the framework to social action, we relegate it to the taken for granted. Because it is unquestioned it may have more influence than at first appears.

*Kim Dovey*<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapter I examined performers' experiences in the wings, observing the dangers and tensions that performers encounter in such marginal zones, as well as the various compensatory tactics they employ in response. Taken together, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Armfield, "Message from Neil," in *Company B Belvoir St Theatre 2003*, Subscription Booklet (Sydney: Company B Ltd., 2002), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, 105.

previous two chapters I have identified and described the backstage activities and experiences of theatrical performers – their preparations, monitoring, and social negotiations – as well as the anxieties they face when making the transition from offstage to on. Having drawn on a range of performers’ experiences, the nature of this description has been necessarily general. Furthermore, my description has involved strongly categorising performers’ activities as an aid to understanding them. This contrasts with performers’ lived experiences, in which their social encounters, pre-performance preparations, games, and transitions all converge and interpenetrate, to the extent that performers experience them as a continuum, albeit differentiated, of backstage activity.

In this chapter I analyse the material of the previous two by explicitly situating it in the context of the performance process – what Richard Schechner describes as a multi-part ‘time-space sequence’<sup>3</sup> – and one of the eight theatre buildings documented in Chapter Three. This chapter comprises a case study of two productions performed at the Belvoir Street Theatre: Siren Theatre Co.’s 2003 production of *Frozen* and Company B’s 2004 production of *Run Rabbit Run*. I first describe the various discourses that have been deployed about Belvoir Street, before introducing *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* and detailing the rehearsal trajectories of both productions. I then describe the experiences of both casts at Belvoir, and the different ways in which they inhabited and made work in that place. Combining ethnographic accounts of practice with performers’ reflections, in this chapter I describe how the ‘who’ and the ‘where’ of theatrical performance are mutually constitutive, arguing that performers’ own understandings of what it is to be a performer – essentially their *identities* as performers – are formed through their more or less habitual inhabitational practices, their various embodied interactions with the specific places in which they make performance.

The Belvoir Street Theatre and Company B, the theatre’s resident production company,<sup>4</sup> together occupy a prestigious position in the field of Australian theatre.

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<sup>3</sup> See chap. 1, n. 5.

<sup>4</sup> The Belvoir Street Theatre is the main venue for Company B productions, being the theatre in which Company B presents its annual subscription season. At the time of writing, the theatre building houses offices for Company B’s production and administration staff. Workshop facilities are housed off-site. Performers and other artistic staff are hired on a production-by-production basis.

Actor Roy Billing has remarked on the existence of “a certain cachet”<sup>5</sup> associated with working for Company B; another actor, Josef Ber, commented that the company is “held in high regard in the industry.”<sup>6</sup> In her analysis of Company B’s marketing strategy, Beverley Thompson cites Company B’s strengths as “brilliant drama, by committed actors, to full houses, astutely directed.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Company B has enjoyed remarkable success since its first production in March 1985 and, under the artistic direction of Neil Armfield since 1994, it has attracted star Australian performers and produced a number of memorable productions.<sup>8</sup> For performers, Belvoir Street “feels like an art space,”<sup>9</sup> being a place with a distinct “theatre history.”<sup>10</sup> Actor Meaghan Davies noted that, for her, working with Company B at Belvoir Street was “about practising your craft.”<sup>11</sup> This notion – that Belvoir is a place dedicated to the honing and practising of craft – is the source of much of Belvoir’s cultural capital amongst performers. One actor colourfully summed up this view by describing Belvoir as,

... the Mount Rushmore; it’s one of the Mount Rushmores as an actor. It’s like, ‘you’ve worked there’. It’s one of those spaces in Sydney ... ‘you’ve worked there.’ It doesn’t matter what you’ve done there, but you’ve worked there.<sup>12</sup>

That Belvoir is ‘one of *those* spaces’ of which people can say ‘I’ve worked there’ is a result of the acknowledged quality of its productions as well as the combination of particular discourses that successfully position Belvoir Street as different from other places of theatre-making in Sydney.

In common parlance, Company B and the Belvoir Street Theatre are frequently referred to as a single entity, simply ‘Belvoir’ or ‘Belvoir Street,’ a “fusion of names of the performance company and the venue.”<sup>13</sup> This practice of conflating the names

<sup>5</sup> Roy Billing, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 7 February 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Ber, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 6 February 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Beverley Thompson, "Company B Ltd: Sydney's Alternative Theatre and Performance Group," in *Innovative Arts Marketing*, ed. Ruth Rentschler (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 183.

<sup>8</sup> These performers include Geoffrey Rush, Richard Roxburgh and Cate Blanchett. Notable performances include *Hamlet* (1994), *The Small Poppies* (2000) and *Cloudstreet* (original production, 1998, UK and USA tour 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Davies, interview.

<sup>10</sup> Kiefel, interview.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, interview.

<sup>12</sup> Cutting, interview.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, "Company B Ltd: Sydney's Alternative Theatre and Performance Group," 185.

Thompson notes this fusion because it has proved problematic for Company B. In the past, between

of the theatre and the production company into one originates in part from their common origin. In 1984 a syndicate of arts and media professionals purchased the theatre building after its previous owners, the Nimrod Theatre Company, put it up for sale. The purchase of the building resulted in the creation of two companies: Company A was created to own the building itself; Company B was formed to mount productions.<sup>14</sup> That the name ‘Belvoir’ is now used as a shorthand reference to both is evidence of a symbiosis of built place, work practice and culture at Belvoir. Indeed, the place that is ‘Belvoir’ seems to encapsulate the company itself, with a strong sense that the place possesses a primacy over the production company. Company B artistic director Neil Armfield has recently stated:

The very *existence* of the theatre company is due to the particular architectural energies of that extraordinary auditorium and corner stage at Belvoir St: everything we do there somehow issues out of that corner so that it belongs there uniquely.<sup>15</sup>

### *Discourses of Origin, Art and Family at Belvoir*

In Chapter Two I described how the built environments we inhabit are mediated through the discourses that in part construct them. Thomas Markus and Deborah Cameron argue that while “buildings are not linguistic objects [...] the meaning we accord to them is heavily dependent on texts about them, texts whose medium is written or spoken language.”<sup>16</sup> This is because buildings are designed, constructed and used “within a complex web of social and political concerns.”<sup>17</sup> To explicate this web is important, although one can in no way simply predict the use of buildings through the analysis of dominant discourses. In this section I examine three key discourses that are deployed about Belvoir: The first is the way in which Company B corporately represents and appropriates the history of the building it inhabits; the second is the way in which the public comments of Company B Artistic Director Neil Armfield

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Company B productions, the theatre has been hired to other companies. Thompson argues that because there is “a confusion in people’s perception of the theatre and the theatre company,” “questionable productions” held in the theatre can impact negatively on the image and branding of Company B. (194)

<sup>14</sup> The rationale behind the creation of two companies was that if Company B were ever to go bankrupt, then the building itself would remain safe from liquidation.

<sup>15</sup> [Armfield’s italics] Neil Armfield, “Message From Neil,” in *Company B Belvoir 2006*, Subscription Booklet (Sydney: Company B Ltd., 2005), 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Markus and Cameron, *The Words between the Spaces: Buildings and Language*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), xiv.

have helped promote and maintain a certain culture at Belvoir; finally, the third is the way in which Company B positions the two theatres within the Belvoir building in relation to each other.

### **1. The ‘originality and energy’ of Company B**

In an attempt to account for its success and dominant position within the field of Australian theatre, and to maintain that position, Company B continually represents itself as a company that benefits from a unique origin. For Company B, that origin is the communal action that resulted in the purchase of the Belvoir Street building, thus saving it from demolition:

The originality and energy of Company B productions arose out of the unique action taken to save the Nimrod Theatre building from demolition in 1984. Rather than lose a performance space in inner city Sydney, more than 600 arts, entertainment and media professionals formed a syndicate to buy the building. The syndicate included nearly every successful person in Australian show business.<sup>18</sup>

This short statement appears in numerous Company B publications. Subscription booklets, production programmes and media releases almost always include this statement as the opening paragraph for any public account of what Company B is and does. Indeed, the action to purchase the building receives more upfront attention than do the artistic priorities that the founders of Company B originally articulated. These priorities ranged from “radical interpretations of classics to newly commissioned plays, the work and expression of ideas by women, Aboriginal theatre and new forms of theatre.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, the artistic success, and the ‘originality and energy’ of Company

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<sup>18</sup> “Company B Belvoir,” in *Company B Belvoir St Theatre 2003*, Subscription Booklet (Sydney: Company B Ltd., 2002), 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ron Blair, “Company B,” in *The Currency Press Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 86. The Company B Belvoir website describes the “vision” of the company as “to create contemporary, politically sharp, hard edged Australian theatre; to develop new forms of theatrical expression; to create work by and about Aboriginal Australians; contemporary music theatre; work created by women; radical interpretations of the classics and work that is surprising, diverse and passionate.” “Belvoir St Theatre History,” *Company B Belvoir Street Theatre*, Company B Ltd., [http://www.belvoir.com.au/231\\_about\\_belvoir\\_history.php](http://www.belvoir.com.au/231_about_belvoir_history.php) (accessed 7 March 2005).

B, are represented as coming from a direct community action that involved Australian show business people who were already successful in their own right.<sup>20</sup>

The oft-repeated reference by Company B to the communal action out of which it was created emphasises a link between Company B and the Australian theatrical movement now referred to as the ‘New Wave.’ The Nimrod Theatre Company, which had converted the Belvoir Street building from its original use as a tomato sauce factory into a theatre, was an important Sydney-based part of the New Wave movement. Julian Meyrick, in his history of Nimrod, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave*, defines the ‘New Wave’ as a “generationally-shaped ‘idea of theatre’ that held sway in Australia from the late 1960s onwards.”<sup>21</sup> This ‘idea of theatre’ involved a rejection of what New Wave practitioners saw as the authoritarian and anglophile practices of existing Australian theatre companies in favour of an “aggressively democratic,” nationalistic and experimental approach.<sup>22</sup> What is particularly interesting about Meyrick’s account of Nimrod is his recognition (albeit often implicit) that the buildings Nimrod occupied were highly important in the company’s vision of itself. Nimrod, a small but vibrant theatre company, leased and converted the Belvoir Street building in 1973/4, having outgrown its original miniscule premises in Nimrod Street, Kings Cross.<sup>23</sup> This new “Surry Hills building,” states Meyrick, “was the making of Nimrod.”<sup>24</sup> The new theatre’s “large and well-appointed bar” became a focus for activity, a place where “people met, talked and disputed.”<sup>25</sup> The building was also seen as an expansion of what Nimrod had already created. In the program to *The Bacchoi*, the first Nimrod production in the new Surry Hills theatre, the architect Vivian Fraser was praised for having “inspiredly translated the unique Nimrod space into the new spatial dimensions.”<sup>26</sup> This comment reveals that there was something that, at the time, could be claimed as a ‘unique Nimrod

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<sup>20</sup> The Company B website lists a number of these successful Australian cultural personalities: Robyn Archer, Gillian Armstrong, Peter Carey, Ruth Cracknell, Judy Davis, Mel Gibson, Max Gillies, Dorothy Hewitt, Nicole Kidman, Sam Neill, Dame Joan Sutherland, Patrick White, David Williamson, Neil Armfield, Mike Willesee, Colin Friels, and Gwen Plumb. Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Meyrick, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Meyrick provides a tabulated account of the differences between the ‘Anglo’ and ‘New Wave’ generations of Australian theatre practitioners. See Ibid., 10.

<sup>23</sup> Nimrod’s original theatre is now operated as The Stables Theatre.

<sup>24</sup> Meyrick, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave*, 198.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>26</sup> Nimrod Archives, Mitchell Library, New South Wales, Box 1., *The Bacchoi* (Theatre Programme, Nimrod Theatre Company, 1974).

space,' presumably based on the triangular stage-in-a-corner configuration of their original Kings Cross theatre. In his recent memoir, former Nimrod director John Bell alludes to the importance of the spaces Nimrod created as constituting a vital part of Nimrod's artistic achievement. Bell reflects that Nimrod "left behind two excellent theatre venues (now known as the Stables and Belvoir Street) *to carry on the work we had started.*"<sup>27</sup>

While theatre practitioners might be clear about the importance of the built environment to their day-to-day activities, academic discussions remain impoverished, insofar as they are based largely on visual conceptions of architectural meaning. That Company B refers to the communal purchase of a building as the key source of its originality, energy and success demonstrates that, as McAuley writes, the "link with tradition and practice provided by the theatre building is particularly important."<sup>28</sup> The purchase of the Belvoir building in the mid 1980s was spurred on by the demolition of other inner-city theatres, The Theatre Royal and The Tivoli amongst them, and represented "an attempt to rescue for the future a meaning given to the present by the past."<sup>29</sup> The exact nature of that meaning for each of the individual members of the purchasing syndicate may have been radically different, but for each it coalesced on the building itself, its "bricks and mortar and seats and stages."<sup>30</sup> Nimrod had, in effect, opened up the building, creating ground for a further flowering of New Wave artistic activity and, in the process, enfranchised a new generation of Australian theatre practitioners. While the Nimrod Theatre Company became a battleground for differing ideologies and was increasingly beset by financial instability and mismanagement, the building itself was inscribed with a certain sensibility of artistic labour and integrity. The purchase of the building demonstrated a desire to conserve this and, indeed, to own and perpetuate it.<sup>31</sup> Through explicitly locating its origins in the community action to purchase the Belvoir Street building, Company B seeks to position itself as the inheritor of the New Wave's artistic legacy.

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<sup>27</sup> [Italics added] Bell, *The Time of My Life*, 149.

<sup>28</sup> McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 38.

<sup>29</sup> Meyrick, *See How It Runs: Nimrod and the New Wave*, 199.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, "Company B Ltd: Sydney's Alternative Theatre and Performance Group," 187.

<sup>31</sup> Today, Belvoir is "the only theatre [in Sydney] that is owned by the industry, actors, directors and writers." Sophie Watson, "Feminist Cultural Production: The Tampax Mafia, an Interview with Chris Westwood of the Belvoir Street Theatre," in *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions*, ed. Sophie Watson (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 222.

## 2. Neil Armfield's 'family'

The discourse employed by Neil Armfield, sole artistic director of Company B since 1994, is vital to any understanding of how practitioners experience Belvoir because of the very authority with which he speaks.<sup>32</sup> Armfield is variously described as “the most authoritative creative voice in the country”<sup>33</sup> and “the pre-eminent Australian stage director of his generation.”<sup>34</sup> Certainly, within Company B,

[H]e is without doubt the uniting force in keeping together this tight-knit artistic cohort, and in continuing to ignite the spark of creative performance production for which Company B Ltd – or rather, ‘Belvoir Street’ – has become famous.<sup>35</sup>

One practitioner even commented to me that Company B “*is* Neil.” Despite his humility and unassuming demeanor, the cultural capital Armfield possesses is enough to markedly affect actors’ behaviour when he enters a room.<sup>36</sup>

Armfield’s discourse consistently describes Company B as a ‘family,’ and evokes particular features of the building’s fabric as intimately connected to the work produced by this ‘family.’ “There is at Belvoir Street,” stated Armfield in an interview with James Waites, “a family of actors, production artists and staff ...”<sup>37</sup> Russell Fewster, in a study of rehearsal for the 1995 production *The Blind Giant Is Dancing*, noted that while Armfield initially sought to bring together a formal ensemble of actors working at Company B, economic pressures led to it becoming a much looser affair. “Speaking in 1996 Armfield stated that already he didn’t refer to

<sup>32</sup> Prior to 1994, Company B’s members annually elected up to nine artistic directors. Chris Westwood and Sue Hill held the position jointly in 1984-85. Westwood held the position solely from 1985 to 1988. Robyn Kershaw held the position from 1989 to 1994. Louise O’Halloran held the position briefly during 1994. Blair, “Company B,” 86.

<sup>33</sup> Carmel Dwyer, “The Power Line: The Arts,” *The Bulletin*, 4 June 2002, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Ian Maxwell, “Neil Armfield,” in *Fifty Key Theatre Directors*, ed. Shomit Mitter and Maria Shevtsova (London: Routledge, 2005), 241.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, “Company B Ltd: Sydney’s Alternative Theatre and Performance Group,” 184.

<sup>36</sup> I witnessed this first-hand during the final rehearsal room run of *Frozen*. The presence of Armfield at that rehearsal led to a complete change in the attitudes of performers and the atmosphere of the room. The rehearsal suddenly turned into a performance *for* Armfield. A similar situation was reported to me by one of the performers in *Run Rabbit Run*; when Armfield sat in on a rehearsal, reportedly “everyone played to him.”

<sup>37</sup> James Waites, “Excellent Marriage of Theory and Practice,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 November 1994, 15A.

Company B as ‘an ensemble’ any more but rather like a ‘family’ that had ‘grown up together’.<sup>38</sup> In his ‘Message from Neil’ in the 2003 Subscription Booklet, Armfield invoked the primitive working conditions endured by practitioners at Belvoir as something endured in pursuit of a ‘dream’: “Some Thank yous ... To all the artists, crews and staff at Company B who work in primitive conditions and for shoestring salaries to keep the dream of the company alive.”<sup>39</sup>

Armfield’s focus on elements of the Belvoir building’s physical fabric effectively highlights the building as a reason for the Company’s success. Invoking the physical arrangement of the stage itself – a three-sided thrust nestling into the right-angled corner formed by the meeting of two of the building’s external walls – Armfield explains that “our little corner in Surry Hills,”<sup>40</sup> (note, too, his plural expression of ownership) “just seems to contain a story so well, it’s like the spine of a book [...] with the actors those characters.”<sup>41</sup> For Armfield, the building structures the work at Belvoir, with the result that “people and behaviour are cornered and highly focussed.”<sup>42</sup> Armfield also combines the arrangement of backstage spaces and the company’s tight economic situation and presents them as an integral part of the Company’s overall performative aesthetic: “At Belvoir Street I think the notion of wage parity and I suppose a single dressing room, does very much affect what’s communicated from the stage to the audience.”<sup>43</sup> Armfield’s mention of ‘wage parity’ is a reference to Company B’s Parity Pay policy, according to which all full-time and permanent part-time staff (including performers) are paid the same hourly rate per week.<sup>44</sup> This policy plays an important part in providing a sense of equity amongst

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<sup>38</sup> Russell Fewster, "A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of *the Blind Giant Is Dancing* by Neil Armfield and the Company B Ensemble" (MA Thesis, University of Sydney, 2001), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Company B Limited, *Subscription Booklet* (2003), 9.

<sup>40</sup> [Italics added] Neil Armfield, "Message from Neil," in *2004 Company B Belvoir St Theatre Season Book* (Sydney: Company B Ltd., 2003), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Armfield in Fewster, "A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of *the Blind Giant Is Dancing* by Neil Armfield and the Company B Ensemble", 10.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholson, "Design Constrictions," 220.

<sup>43</sup> John Golder and Richard Madelaine, "Elsinore at Belvoir Street: Neil Armfield Talks About Hamlet," *Australasian Drama Studies* 26, no. April (1995): 73.

<sup>44</sup> The Company B Belvoir website states, “All employees of the Company are paid according to our Parity Pay policy. The philosophy behind this policy is a belief in the equal value of the contribution of every employee. Rather than remunerate staff by reference to their market rate, all full-time and permanent part-time employees are paid the same hourly rate per week.” “Jobs,” *Company B Belvoir Street Theatre*, Company B Ltd., [http://www.belvoir.com.au/250\\_about\\_jobs.php](http://www.belvoir.com.au/250_about_jobs.php) (accessed 5 May 2006).

Company B employees. Company B General Manager Rachel Healy has stated that the policy was created in the mid 1980s “based on the belief that everyone’s contribution was equally valuable to the company’s success.”<sup>45</sup> The policy also undergirds the company’s focus on artistic practice to the exclusion of monetary remuneration. As the Company B website reads, “Working at Company B is highly rewarding in every way (except financially!)”<sup>46</sup>

Armfield’s discourse of family and his invoking of the particular physical and economic conditions at Belvoir are important on two fronts. Firstly, they signal attempts to differentiate Belvoir from other places of cultural production. Places are arguably defined not through any qualities essential to the place in question, but through the differences, or links, between that place and other places.<sup>47</sup> For Belvoir, it is the Sydney Theatre Company that is commonly referred to as a point of differentiation. From the outset, Belvoir’s artistic policies have evidenced a desire to give voice to people whose voices aren’t heard in ‘mainstream’ theatre. The Sydney Theatre Company (STC) is the flagship state-subsidised theatre company in New South Wales, a mantle it took on following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company in 1979.<sup>48</sup> It is therefore the STC that is inevitably mentioned when talk about the ‘mainstream’ arises. Chris Westwood, speaking in 1990, mentioned how Company B was, at the time, “looking at the need to be more radical in the light of the overall conservative climate and the need to distance ourselves further away from the

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<sup>45</sup> Rachel Healy quoted in Judy Adamson, "Nobody's Fool," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 2002, 3.

<sup>46</sup> “Jobs,” *Company B Belvoir Street Theatre*.

<sup>47</sup> On this point Doreen Massey has argued, “[W]hat gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus.” Doreen Massey, "Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird, et al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 66. See also, Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> Resident at The Wharf, the STC presents an annual twelve-play subscription season performed at Wharf One, The Sydney Theatre and the Drama Theatre in the Sydney Opera House. In addition it presents an artistic development program (recently renamed ‘Wharf 2Loud’), and an annual comic revue. The STC also maintains *The Actors Company*, a permanent ensemble of twelve actors. The STC’s ‘Mission Statement’ reads: “Sydney Theatre Company (STC) produces theatre of the highest standard that consistently illuminates, entertains and challenges. It is committed to the engagement between the imagination of its artists and its audiences, to the development of the artform of theatre and to excellence in all its endeavours.” "Profile: Our Mission," *Sydney Theatre Company*, <http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/content.asp?cID=44> (accessed 11 May 2006).

Sydney Theatre Company.”<sup>49</sup> Russell Fewster notes that such behaviour involves what Pierre Bourdieu has referred to as a series of ‘position-takings.’<sup>50</sup> In Fewster’s view Company B has sought the position of a “genuine alternative theatre company.”<sup>51</sup> This, Fewster notes, is even made evident in rehearsal room practice. During discussions of the set design for Stephen Sewell’s *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, Fewster noted Armfield’s explicit comparison of the Company B set to that utilised by the STC in their previous production of the same work: “[The] difference between STC and us [is a] crappy black finish.”<sup>52</sup> While Armfield appears, in making this comparison, to denigrate the production values of his own company, this offhand statement is an important part of articulating Company B’s alternative vision of good theatre practice. Company B’s set designer Stephen Curtis commented on the STC’s production of *The Blind Giant*: “STC tried to create living worlds [which] slowed the action down. [They] tied little worlds to mince detail and lost the sense of the whole.”<sup>53</sup> During my fieldwork with *Run Rabbit Run*, one employee expressed similar sentiments, describing Company B simply as “not STC.” Furthermore, she stated that this “is the reason everyone comes and works here, because they’re not the STC.”

Secondly, the evocation of familial relations helps to create a social environment in which primitive working conditions and comparatively poor monetary remuneration are endured because of loyalty to a certain craft-driven vision of theatrical performance and an emphasis on the value of close interpersonal relationships. “It’s not exactly glamorous,” observed one practitioner, “but [...] everyone accepts that when they accept a job at Company B.”<sup>54</sup> The connotations of belonging, of mutuality and, indeed, *love*, that stem from being cast as members of a family are necessary at Belvoir. The sheer crowdedness of the Belvoir Street building and the lack of amenity suffered by administration staff, technical practitioners and performers alike mean that the best must be brought out of people in order to continue creating work under

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<sup>49</sup> Watson, "Feminist Cultural Production: The Tampax Mafia, an Interview with Chris Westwood of the Belvoir Street Theatre," 223.

<sup>50</sup> Fewster, "A Rehearsal Analysis of the Production of *The Blind Giant Is Dancing* by Neil Armfield and the Company B Ensemble", 11.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Russell Fewster, "Product or Process? Industry or Art? Company B a Model for a National Theatre?" in *Dis/Orientations Conference Proceedings* (Melbourne: Centre for Drama and Theatre Studies Monash University, 1997), 94.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>54</sup> Kylie Mascord, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 14 February 2004.

such conditions. Armfield's discourse speaks strategically to this reality. It keeps people engaged in the company even when the conditions of work (and the pay) are so basic because it seeks to interweave their personal and professional identities with the place.

### 3. Upstairs/Downstairs

What you do at Belvoir does, however, depend on exactly where you do it. Within the Belvoir Street building the two separate theatres are positioned very differently from each other. In practice, each theatre's physical positioning within Belvoir Street is a material manifestation of their relative positioning in the field of theatrical performance in Sydney. The vertical positioning of the theatres – one 'Upstairs' and the other 'Downstairs' – connotes a hierarchy that is understood by practitioners and the public alike. The Upstairs Theatre is a 'mainstream' venue (although, as previously noted it is ambiguously mainstream, as Company B positions itself as an 'alternative/radical mainstream' theatre company) and is the theatre space that is most readily thought of as 'Belvoir.' Indeed, in a sense already alluded to by Neil Armfield's comments, this performance space *is* Company B. To say 'I saw a show at Belvoir last night' is to suggest that one saw a show in the Upstairs Theatre.

The term 'Downstairs' operates as a marker distinguishing it from what is normative. This marked quality can be discerned in the following statement by Armfield:

It's been wonderful to watch the flow of artists and ideas between the Upstairs and Downstairs Theatres. Young companies and directors are gaining mainstream opportunities and more established members of the Company B family are revitalising their artistic energies in the Downstairs space.<sup>55</sup>

The Downstairs is something *different*, valorised as a 'revitalising' but still essentially 'fringe' space. The term 'fringe' is, however, imprecise, especially at Belvoir. Actor Nicholas Papademetriou wrestled with the ambiguity of the Downstairs Theatre when

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<sup>55</sup> Neil Armfield quoted in "Company B Keepers," Brochure (Sydney: Company B Theatre Foundation, 2001).

I asked him to rate – on a scale from one (lowest) to ten (highest) – the standard of backstage facilities afforded actors working within it:

You've got to have two rating standards ... as a theatre I would put it as a four back there, for both the main house and this theatre, the Downstairs ... compared to a really good theatre. But compared to other theatre spaces in Sydney, excluding one or two other mainstream venues, the Downstairs theatre would be called a fringe venue, even though it's in a mainstream theatre ... so if you compare it to the other well known theatres, The Fitzroy, The Stables and PACT and Sidetrack, then the facilities rate like an eight.<sup>56</sup>

The Downstairs is uncertainly situated between other established positions within the field. Compared to a 'really good theatre,' Papademetriou perceived the facilities provided for performers in both the Upstairs and the Downstairs Theatres as poor, while compared to other 'fringe' spaces in Sydney, he perceived the Downstairs Theatre as actually well-apportioned.

For many years the Downstairs Theatre was regarded as a problematic venue by Belvoir management, mainly because of its ambiguous relationship with Company B. The theatre was originally used as a rehearsal space by Nimrod, and adapted to serve as a smaller experimental theatre space in 1976.<sup>57</sup> Between 1984 and 1998 the theatre was reconfigured a number of times and was governed by a variety of curatorial policies. Since 1998 Company B has presented a series of works by independent companies under the title of 'B Sharp.' The production *Frozen* was presented as part of this curated programme. In the subscription booklet for the season in which *Frozen* was included, the director of B Sharp, Lyn Wallis, described the season (under the heading 'There's no place like (our) home') as presenting "nine stomping theatre companies preparing to run riot!"<sup>58</sup> The companies were described as "excitable guests" that "may break the plates and rattle the windows, but they are guaranteed to deliver an inspiring season of independent works."<sup>59</sup> This discourse, despite its apparent generosity, clearly delineates between Company B and the independent

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<sup>56</sup> Papademetriou, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Blair, "Company B," 85.

<sup>58</sup> Lyn Wallis, "There's No Place Like (Our) Home..." in *B Sharp 2003* (Subscription Booklet, Company B Ltd., 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

companies. The metaphor of home is evoked as ‘our’ (Company B’s) home into which these ‘guests’ are allowed. Furthermore, these guests are a potentially disruptive influence – which, admittedly, is part of their appeal. They are presented as containing a rough energy that, while dangerous, creates ‘inspiring’ theatre. By placing B Sharp companies in a relationship with Company B proper as ‘guests,’ their work is sanctioned and appropriated by Company B, but they are still carefully positioned as *not* Company B. If they succeed, then Company B shares credit for having invited them into Company B’s home. If they fail, then we (the public) are subtly reminded that they are *not* Company B.

The three discourses that I have described comprise a particularly strategic and authoritative narrative about Belvoir, defining what it is (importantly, by referring to what it is not) and explaining how and why it exists. These discourses privilege the Belvoir Street building, positing it and its purchase in the mid 1980s as the major source of Company B’s creativity and success. The building is described as aiding theatre practitioners through ‘focussing’ and ‘cornering’ them. The building might indeed be ‘primitive’ but it is ‘home’ to a ‘family’ who keep a collective ‘dream’ alive. Finally, the building allows both established and emerging artists ‘opportunity,’ the opportunity to pursue as well as to ‘rejuvenate’ their ‘artistic energies.’ Noticeably, this narrative emphasises the considerable constraints imposed by the Belvoir building’s sheer lack of facility as *positively enabling* artistic creation. Furthermore, Belvoir is advocated as a place that fosters ideals that are symbolically rich in the field of Australian theatre, ideals of mutuality, belonging and the development of artistic craft.<sup>60</sup>

Performers working at Belvoir necessarily engage with this narrative, negotiating the meaning of their own lived experience at Belvoir both through it and against it. In this process, performers experience the place that is Belvoir through inscribing it with

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<sup>60</sup> In his investigation of Australian actors’ experiences moving from training institutions into professional life, Paul Moore uses Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theories to analyse how the values instilled into actors during their training – distilled from pedagogic relationships based on submission, the encouragement of a disinterested attitude towards artistic creation (‘art for art’s sake’) and a focus on ensemble work – create dispositions that simply do not match with the “blatantly mercenary practices of professional life.” Moore, “Longing to Belong: Trained Actors’ Attempts to Enter the Profession”, 73. Ideals such as those I have listed above – mutuality, belonging and the development of artistic craft – occupy a position of high cultural capital because of their very rarity.

their own “narratives of use.”<sup>61</sup> These are individual *bodily* narratives, comprised of accumulated, iterative inhabitational practices. At Belvoir, performers ‘work out’ their identities *as performers*, a process that is neither free from the mediating, constituting presence of discourse, nor entirely subjected to it. Instead, as Lise Nelson has argued, the formation of identity is “an inherently unstable and partial process,”<sup>62</sup> and the doing of identity by human subjects is “a process directly tied to their lived personal history, intersubjective relationships, and their imbeddedness in particular historical moments and places.”<sup>63</sup>

It is to a consideration of the inhabitational practices that performers engaged in whilst working on *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* that I now turn. This move from an analysis of discourse to an ethnographic account of bodily practice entails a distinct degree of tension, involving a shift from a consideration of space as ‘conceived’ to that of space as ‘lived.’ However, as Edward Casey has written, the creation of culture is an embodied process:

Bodies not only perceive but *know* places. Perceiving bodies are *knowing bodies*, and inseparable from what they know is culture as it imbues and shapes particular places. It is by bodies that places become cultural in character.”<sup>64</sup>

I must therefore examine what it is that performers *do* at Belvoir when considering how that might be tied up with discourse. This necessitates a consideration of rehearsal process, for it is in rehearsal that the spatial practices associated with any given theatrical production are formed. However, before I describe these rehearsal processes, I must first provide further context for both *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run*.

### *Contextualizing the Productions*

Within the Belvoir family, *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* were positioned in quite distinct ways. This positioning, expressed through the marketing of both productions

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<sup>61</sup> Leach, "Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space," 282.

<sup>62</sup> Lise Nelson, "Bodies (and Spaces) Do Matter: The Limits of Performativity," *Gender, Place and Culture* 6, no. 4 (1999): 348.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>64</sup> Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time," 34.

as well as through the remuneration involved, provided a frame through which the performers involved approached their work at Belvoir, a frame that partially reflected the performers' differing motivations for participating in each production. Both productions were part of 2003 subscription seasons on offer at Belvoir Street's two performance spaces: *Frozen* was performed from 29<sup>th</sup> May to 12<sup>th</sup> June 2003 as part of the B Sharp programme in the Downstairs Theatre, while *Run Rabbit Run* was performed for five and a half weeks from 7<sup>th</sup> of January to 15<sup>th</sup> February 2004 as part of the Company B season in the Upstairs Theatre.<sup>65</sup> *Frozen* was positioned within a tradition of 'fringe' theatre, while *Run Rabbit Run*, as a piece of 'verbatim theatre,'<sup>66</sup> was positioned within an 'alternative - mainstream' tradition of other verbatim theatre productions at Belvoir, notably Paul Brown's *Aftershocks* and Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*.

For the performers involved, these differences in institutional context correlate with significantly different material working conditions as well as fitting within their "larger career trajectories" in rather different ways.<sup>67</sup> *Frozen* was presented by Siren Theatre Co., the personal vehicle of its founder, director Kate Gaul. Work with Siren is undertaken on a co-operative basis and payment for practitioners is forthcoming only in the event of a profit being made.<sup>68</sup> As with most co-operative productions, work with Siren is primarily arranged informally, through networks of practitioners, and is largely undertaken for the intrinsic rewards on offer. During my interviews with the cast of *Frozen*, many expressed a straightforward preference for working on a production (even if unpaid) over not working. This was explained primarily in terms of maintaining or developing performance skills, and secondarily in terms of gaining exposure to casting agents and potential employers. Some performers had an ongoing working relationship with Kate and regularly appear in productions directed by her; others alluded to the fact that working with a director of Kate's standing might lead to paid employment in one of her future productions with a mainstream theatre

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<sup>65</sup> While forming part of the 2003 Company B subscription season *Run Rabbit Run* was performed in early 2004.

<sup>66</sup> Verbatim theatre is a form of theatre where text is generated from interviews with members of a given community, often after a significant or traumatic event. The text may be shaped, but not usually added to, by a scriptwriter. Alana Valentine commented during rehearsals for *Run Rabbit Run*, "I haven't massaged any of it [...] it's real peoples' speech."

<sup>67</sup> Rossmanith, "Making Theatre-Making: Rehearsal Practice and Cultural Production", 50.

<sup>68</sup> During rehearsals for *Frozen* a number of the cast were concurrently engaged in forms of paid employment.

company. By contrast, work with Company B involves a set level of monetary remuneration, and the standard negotiation of employment contracts. As well as the intrinsic benefits associated with performance work, significant extrinsic benefits are on offer to performers, particularly the exposure and cultural capital that are associated with work for Company B.

Merely stressing the differences between these two productions, however, is not entirely useful as there were also significant connections. Both productions shared the same director, Kate Gaul, and both casts were made up entirely of trained professional actors; *Frozen* was performed by Josef Ber, Nicholas Brown, Eileen Camilleri, Blair Cutting, Alan Flower, Eliza Logan, Nicholas Papademetriou (hereafter referred to as ‘Nic P.’), Andy Rodoreda, and Jerusha Sutton; the cast of *Run Rabbit Run* were Josef Ber, Roy Billing, Wayne Blair, Tyler Coppin, Julie Hamilton, Jody Kennedy, Russell Keifel, Eliza Logan, Georgina Naidu, and Alex Sideratos. Two actors, Josef Ber and Eliza Logan, worked on both productions.<sup>69</sup> The writer of *Frozen*, Michael O’Brien, was also a former business manager for Company B, a fact that generated considerable interest in the production amongst Company B employees. Indeed, overlaps in personnel between different productions are common in the relatively small field of theatrical performance in Australia, a situation that often renders the firm categorisation of productions and practitioners unhelpfully reductive.

Thematically, both productions were set in an area geographically adjacent to that in which they were performed. *Frozen* dealt with the ambiguity of historical narrative; presenting a fictionalised future Australia, *Frozen* explored the interconnections between individuals whose lives are affected by the assassination of an Australian President shot whilst “touring the streets of [inner city] Sydney.”<sup>70</sup> Echoes of John F. Kennedy’s assassination were mixed with strong Sydney references, all the time refracted through the personal significance of the event to the lives of the characters involved. *Run Rabbit Run* was very consciously located in the geographic vicinity of Belvoir, being a verbatim theatre production that described the varied fortunes of the

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<sup>69</sup> Eliza and Josef have worked regularly with Kate. Josef and Kate had met while studying at NIDA (The National Institute of Dramatic Art) during 1996, while Eliza had appeared in every Siren Theatre Co. production preceding *Frozen*. All three had also worked together on the Company B production of *The Laramie Project* in 2001.

<sup>70</sup> “Frozen” in *B Sharp 2003* (Subscription Booklet, Company B Ltd., 2003).

South Sydney Rugby League team, a team whose headquarters and home ground are located approximately one kilometre south of Belvoir. As the Company B subscription booklet explained: “This is a piece of theatre made up from the voices of a community. This time it’s Belvoir’s own community – Surry Hills, Redfern, Alexandria, Waterloo, Mascot, Roseberry.”<sup>71</sup>

### *Rehearsal Trajectories*

In writing about rehearsal Kate Rossmanith has observed that in Sydney it is rare for a production to rehearse at the venue in which it is to be performed.<sup>72</sup> Exactly where a cast rehearses and what use they make of their rehearsal space(s) is crucial in understanding how performers subsequently inhabit the various backstage spaces of the theatre in which they perform. Indeed, Rossmanith argues that a rehearsal space can never be “entirely separated”<sup>73</sup> from the theatre in which a production is performed. For McAuley, rehearsal spaces physically frame practitioners’ experiences: “The nature of the rehearsal space, its level of comfort or discomfort, cleanliness, warmth, and the facilities provided, are a further dimension of the physical framing of the practitioners’ experience.”<sup>74</sup>

In addition to such physical framing, McAuley has also observed that a rehearsal space is “likely to imprint aspects of its own reality on both the fictional world that is being created and even on the physical reality of the set.”<sup>75</sup> McAuley’s dual observations are foundational to my understanding of the respective rehearsal trajectories of *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run*. The collective use performers make of rehearsal spaces effectively predisposes them to certain ways of inhabiting the backstage areas of a theatre. Specifically, performers take with them the ‘time-space routines’ and ‘place ballets’ that develop during rehearsal, both those that comprise the actual onstage performance and those that form the various activities that support

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<sup>71</sup> “Run Rabbit Run,” in *Company B Belvoir St Theatre 2003*, Subscription Booklet (Sydney: Company B Ltd., 2002), 23. This localised feel fed strongly into the production; almost all the media reporting emphasised this point, whilst the performers involved were able to visit the South’s Leagues club and identify supporters’ jerseys and stickers in the streets.

<sup>72</sup> Rossmanith, “Making Theatre-Making: Rehearsal Practice and Cultural Production”, 65.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>74</sup> McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 71.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

that performance. In this section I first consider the spaces in which rehearsals for *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* took place, then the factors that influenced performers' usage of those spaces, and finally I describe the spatial logics that emerged.

### 1. Rehearsal Spaces

Rehearsals for *Frozen* took place in a variety of rehearsal spaces. Initial readings of the script took place in the director's home (as did subsequent 'piano rehearsals');<sup>76</sup> an initial rehearsal for one pair of actors was held at the PACT Youth Theatre in Erskineville [*See Image 10.1*]; and the bulk of rehearsals then occurred at the Middle Eastern Dance Studios on the Princes Highway in the inner city suburb of St. Peters [*See Image 10.2*].<sup>77</sup> The Princes Highway is an extension of Newtown's vibrant King Street, but by the time it reaches St. Peters, the cafes, restaurants, and shops that predominate in the Newtown precinct have given way to a more run-down environment of offices, auto mechanics and small scale manufacturing firms [*See Image 10.3*]. The Middle Eastern Dance Studios are located on the first floor of an anonymous building, accessible via a locked door and a tight, dark, internal staircase [*See Images 10.4 and 10.5*]. Rehearsals took place in an irregularly shaped room that bore clear signs of its use as a dance studio; the wooden floor was polished, a full-length mirror ran down one side of the room, and a desk with paperwork and various items of dance costuming was located at the far end from the entrance [*See Images 10.6, 10.7, and 10.8*]. Adjacent to the desk was a small kitchen area and two doors, one leading to a toilet and the other to an office [*See Image 10.9*]. Posters advertising upcoming or previous dance events dotted the walls. It was also apparent from the internal partition walls and the low panelled ceiling that the room has been adapted from a previous use as an office space [*See Image 10.10*].

Rehearsals for *Run Rabbit Run* took place in St. Stephen's Anglican Church Hall in the inner city suburb of Newtown [*See Image 11.1*]. The hall is positioned in a side

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<sup>76</sup> Kate Gaul wrote in an email that the amount of actors needed for each scene "is also a deciding factor in the selection of a rehearsal space – ie, i[t] is easy to have 2/3 people around a kitchen table to undertake initial investigations." Kate Gaul, "[No Subject]," Personal email, 14 October 2003.

<sup>77</sup> The Middle Eastern Dance Studios were themselves a fallback venue. In an initial letter sent out to all those involved in the production, Kate Gaul had stated that rehearsals would be held in a room above an ethnic fast food shop in the Sydney suburb of Marrickville. This had subsequently, and without comment, been changed.

street, just to the south of King Street, Newtown's main thoroughfare. King Street has benefited from Newtown's increasing gentrification and boasts a wide range of cafes and restaurants as well as an eclectic array of clothing, retail and second-hand stores. Regular bus services and a train station provide transport. A patch of grass adjacent to the hall enabled practitioners to park off the street. The hall itself was a large open rectangular space with a wooden floor and semi-pitched ceiling [See Image 11.2].<sup>78</sup> Translucent windows ran the length of each side [See Image 11.3]. At the street end, nearest the main entrance, was a kitchen [See Image 11.4], whilst at the opposite end it was apparent that the hall once possessed a stage. This had since been boarded up to create a separate room. A number of smaller rooms were located behind the former stage as well as separate male and female toilets. The hall has served as the standard rehearsal venue for Company B over the past five years and is largely booked by them throughout the year. Within it a small lockable room is permanently used by Company B for storage, whilst laminated signs on some of the kitchen cupboards reading "Property of Company B Please Do Not Touch" [See Image 11.5] and the presence of electrical tape on the floor of the hall, marking the dimensions of the Upstairs Theatre stage, both demonstrate the degree to which this rehearsal space has been institutionalised [See Image 11.6].

During the rehearsals of both these productions, performers engaged in almost no specific talk about the rehearsal spaces amongst themselves, indicating the accuracy of Kim Dovey's observation that "most people, most of the time, take the built environment for granted."<sup>79</sup> When the spaces were explicitly discussed, the talk either took the form of brief discussions about the proximity of the rehearsal spaces to other places where car parking, food or coffee could be obtained, or of remarks about how the space failed to meet practitioners' specific needs. At the Middle Eastern Dance Studios I arrived a few days after rehearsals had commenced and was told that a dog in an adjacent room had been interrupting rehearsals by "barking through our scenes."

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<sup>78</sup> Actor John Gaden, writing of his time spent rehearsing in the cast of Company B's 2005 production of David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, noted the disruptive presence of possums living in the ceiling of the hall: "Each evening at sundown, the possums in the ceiling wake and scamper noisily overhead before setting off for the night's marauding. One evening, during a very laborious rehearsal, the scampering stops, and after a pause, through one of the decorative ceiling vents, as small fusillade of steaming pellets clatters down, hitting some of the actors. The unmistakable, pungent smell of possum fills the room." John Gaden, "Everyone's a Critic, and That Includes the Possums," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6-7 August 2005, 40.

<sup>79</sup> Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, 2.

Josef also commented to another performer that the mirror was unsettling, especially when “you see yourself acting in the mirror.” With *Run Rabbit Run*, performers occasionally remarked about the ‘muddied’ acoustics of the hall, a situation that made it hard for performers to hear each other from any distance, and the extreme temperature changes that were experienced. On one particularly hot and humid day Russell announced, “We need air-conditioning!”<sup>80</sup> On another occasion Roy commented, “The echo makes it hard to hear.”<sup>81</sup> None of the performers engaged in obvious or lengthy complaining; once they had aired their comment, work continued.

In the first instance, the sort of talk that performers engaged in about their rehearsal spaces was revealing precisely because of what remained unsaid. Performers only made comments about the rehearsal spaces they inhabited when they perceived specific shortcomings. Using the rehearsal spaces, much like tools, for the execution of a particular task, performers experienced them as ‘recessive,’ below the level of conscious attention. In Heideggerian terms, the rehearsal spaces were habitually experienced as unremarkably ready-to-hand. Only with the perception of specific shortcomings did they suddenly become present-at-hand, and only then for a short period.<sup>82</sup>

In the second instance, the type of talk the performers engaged in when prompted by my questioning suggested both a familiarity with the poor conditions endured and a tacit acceptance of them. The shortcomings of both rehearsal spaces were significant. In addition to those already discussed, neither production had sole use of their rehearsal space and often had to clear away their arrangements of furniture, costumes and props for other users. However, despite such drawbacks, when I privately questioned the cast of *Frozen* about the standard of their rehearsal venues, they all expressed a resigned satisfaction, with many also suggesting that conditions could

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<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the temperature changes experienced during the summer rehearsals for *Run Rabbit Run* were extreme, ranging from quite cold temperatures to hot, humid conditions. My notes from Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> of December 2003 read: “Last week the room had a gas heater and an electric bar heater going to keep people warm. Now we have two fans going to keep us cool. The temperature shifts are extreme ... now with the rain it is hard to hear people above the noise.”

<sup>81</sup> In an email, Kate Gaul commented on the possible effect of the echo on the eventual performance: “It is very hard to hear what the actors are saying and I often won[d]er how much this influences the way text is interpreted [...] I do find this awkward – nuance and intimacy are things that just can’t happen i[n] the hall.” Kate Gaul, “Re: Run Rabbit Run,” Personal email, 10 March 2004.

<sup>82</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 102-07.

actually have been worse. Blair Cutting reflected: “look, it had a wooden floor, there was room [...] I didn’t mind it.” Nic P. remarked: “Well, it had space, it was clean [...] often you might be in a place that has no facilities and the toilets are really cruddy.” I asked Andy Rodoreda to rate the rehearsal space on a scale of one (poor) to ten (good). He replied:

Considering the dogs barking, the few people coming in and out, the fact that it was a building as well and people were also using it as a living quarters at the same time – that was a bit of a distraction. Out of ten I’d say – it was a fairly good size for what we needed – I’d give it a seven.

These statements indicate that performers, especially those familiar with the conditions of fringe theatre practice, are used to unfavourable conditions. The conditions are part and parcel of the work they engage in. Furthermore, they explain why performers don’t complain at length about poor conditions. Complaining is useless because nobody can do anything about the problems and the work itself is considered more important. People must simply make do with what they have. Kate’s comment about rehearsal spaces summarises this attitude well, “I’ll basically work anywhere,” she remarked, “doing the work is more important.”

## **2. Influences on Usage**

As director of both *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run*, Kate Gaul had a profound impact on the way in which performers inhabited both rehearsal spaces. It was Kate who, drawing on the structure of the play texts and actors’ availabilities, scheduled the rehearsals and largely determined the pace and rhythm of rehearsals. As an embodied presence within rehearsal spaces, Kate also affected how the space was utilised. As a director, she prefers a “defined spatial arrangement” in rehearsal, ideally having “the room structured before we start.” In email correspondence she commented that such structuring ideally entails, “A table for chatting around – which acts as a ‘home table’ when we are not on the floor”, as well as, “a clear mark up with little or no clutter around it.”<sup>83</sup> Kate is also very aware of her physical location in rehearsal. During

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<sup>83</sup> Gaul, "Re: Run Rabbit Run." The term ‘mark up’ refers to the practices of marking the dimensions of the performance space in which the production will be performed onto the floor of the rehearsal space.

rehearsals for *Frozen* she remarked to one practitioner, “Basically you can sit anywhere except at my table” [See Image 10.11]. In both productions Kate had set locations that only she would occupy. Finally, Kate controlled the daily running of both rehearsal processes. It was always at her instigation that rehearsals started or breaks were called. It was also Kate who defined how the activities at hand related to the overall trajectory of the rehearsal period through statements like, “The purpose of today is to put the play together,” or “ Now, as per yesterday, we’re going to read through Act Two.”

The play texts for each performance also heavily influenced the inhabitation of rehearsal spaces. In particular, the segmentation of each text influenced how rehearsal schedules could be created, largely by determining which individuals needed to be present at each rehearsal. Michael O’Brien’s text for *Frozen* contained a strong pairing of characters. Most scenes involved interaction among only two, or at the most, three characters, with a number of characters simply never meeting. The pairing allowed scenes to be rehearsed in isolation with only a few actors necessary for each rehearsal. Alana Valentine’s text for *Run Rabbit Run* required the full cast to be present at almost every day of rehearsal. The text, comprised of verbatim interview material from individuals associated with the South Sydney Rugby League Club, was arranged thematically, and this, coupled with the multiple roles allocated to each actor, meant that every scene involved every actor at some point.

The scheduling of rehearsals also affected actors’ inhabitation of the rehearsal spaces. Kate arranged each production’s daily rehearsal schedule on the basis of the structure of the play texts, actors’ availabilities, and the constraints set by economic considerations and industry working standards. Rehearsals for *Frozen* were held over a period of just under five weeks, with the production opening on the Thursday evening of the fifth week. Because of the co-operative nature of the production, the scheduling of rehearsals was idiosyncratic, taking into consideration performers’ existing work commitments. Kate’s cover letter, attached to the initial rehearsal schedule conveyed her concern at this: “We are going to need more rehearsal time.” Noting that, “we don’t meet together as a group until well into the process – again a compromise given availability,” Kate invited performers to visit the rehearsals to

“learn lines” or “just hang.” Despite this invitation, it was only on the Friday of the third week of rehearsals that the whole cast finally gathered in the one room. Rehearsals for *Run Rabbit Run* were also held over five weeks, but a sixth week was provided, this being devoted to the transition into the theatre, technical rehearsals, and preview performances. Rehearsals were scheduled from 9.30am till 5.30pm daily and the full company were present on the majority of days. During the second and third weeks of rehearsals Kate frequently used mornings or afternoons to work on individual actors’ monologues; the full cast was present for only a part of these days.<sup>84</sup> Saturdays were also heavily utilised due to the time taken out by Christmas and New Year.

Importantly, performers working on both *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* brought with them their knowledge of the previous text-based rehearsal processes they had worked on, as well as experiences of working with other performers, Siren Theatre Co., or Company B. The cast of *Frozen* possessed a wide range of experiences. All had undergone actor training, but only some – Josef, Eliza, and Nic P. – possessed mainstream theatre experience. With *Run Rabbit Run*, only Russell, Tyler, and Julie had extensive prior experiences of performing at Belvoir. Josef, Wayne, and Eliza had performed in recent productions at Belvoir, whilst Alex and Jody had never performed there at all. To have had the experience of performing in a given theatre before provides an actor with a great deal of embodied knowledge upon which they can draw during rehearsals. In rehearsals for one scene in *Run Rabbit Run*, Tyler delivered his lines with a raised head – raised more so than the other performers around him – something I’d witnessed him doing before. As he moved about the rehearsal space’s mock stage it became clear from the elevated angle of his head and his movements to his left and right that he was delivering his lines to an imaginary audience in raised seating banks: Tyler was using his intimate knowledge of the Belvoir stage whilst in the rehearsal room. Later when I asked Russell if the rehearsal space had any discernible impact on his rehearsal process he replied,

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<sup>84</sup> Russell Kiefel proved a notable exception to the overall pattern. During rehearsals and performances of *Run Rabbit Run* Russell was involved in the shooting of the television series *Fireflies*. This resulted in his absence for a total of six and a half days – equivalent to a week of rehearsal.

I don't think rehearsal spaces do ... You know what you're working towards. I mean, if you've worked in the theatre before it doesn't matter what the rehearsal space is, you know what you're doing it for, you've got it in your mind that you're going to be in a different place when it counts.<sup>85</sup>

Rehearsing for *Frozen*, Eliza, too, related how, “my head was actually imagining this space [the Downstairs Theatre]. I was consciously visualising. [...] I'm a visual person, so I basically implanted my knowledge of this space into my headspace when we were in the rehearsal room.”<sup>86</sup> Rehearsal spaces play a more dominant role in affecting the dynamics of a production when performers know little about the theatre in which they will perform. Those with more extensive experience at the theatre in which they will perform bring that to bear on the rehearsal space, in effect, causing the rehearsal space to recede.

### 3. Spatial Logics

So far I have described the prime contextual factors from which the rehearsal processes for *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* took their shape, namely, geographical position and layout, the director, dramatic text, scheduling, and prior knowledge and experience. Together, these factors combine in performers' lived experiences to create definite and distinct spatial logics. In this section I briefly describe the salient points of these logics as they emerged during the rehearsals of both *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run*. Because of the lack of talk about this amongst the practitioners, I draw mainly upon my observations of bodily practice, the movements, positions and physical activities undertaken by performers. Here, again, David Seamon's related concepts of 'time-space routines' and 'body-ballets' are foundational, for it is through their embodied practices that practitioners created distinct senses of place. This is pertinent to Casey's understanding that the culture of a place is created through the interaction of 'perceiving,' 'knowing' bodies; Seamon's concepts aid in understanding the process by which bodies can achieve this.

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<sup>85</sup> Russell Kiefel, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 14 February 2004.

<sup>86</sup> Logan, interview.

Both rehearsal processes developed distinct spatial logics, observable through the increasingly routine spatial practices of the individuals involved. With *Frozen*, the use of multiple rehearsal venues profoundly affected this process. Only once the company commenced its regular rehearsals in the Middle Eastern Dance Studios did routine spatial practices emerge. In the case of *Run Rabbit Run* the constant and almost daily use of the one rehearsal venue – itself already significantly institutionalised – supported the development of routine practices. These practices were the mundane activities of everyday inhabitation: where performers sat, where they stood, where they waited, the paths they travelled and where they placed their bags and other personal effects (scripts, pencils, glasses, etc). It was around and within these that the creative work of rehearsal took place, the formation of a group mediated understanding of the play texts and the use of that understanding for the creation and embodiment of character. With practitioners' increasingly regular patterns of behaviour, regular ways of being developed. Distinct 'time-space routines' became evident through the similar positions taken up time and time again.

What practitioners' 'time-space routines' created were rehearsal spaces that were internally differentiated into a series of interconnecting territories. In Chapter Four I cited Robert Sack's definition of 'territoriality,' an attempt "to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area."<sup>87</sup> In the rehearsal spaces for both *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* certain activities consistently occurred in certain territories that were brought into existence both through emerging spatial practice and through more direct discursive means (particularly the application of a name to a particular area). With *Run Rabbit Run*, locations were quickly established, and subsequently explicitly named, in the first week of rehearsal. On the first day of rehearsals a table large enough for all the practitioners present was put together [See Image 11.7]. By the fourth day of rehearsals the traditional text-based rehearsal binary of 'table' and 'floor' had been clearly set up. Kate was particularly responsible for this, referring to the area in which the Upstairs Theatre stage had been outlined with marking tape as "the space," "the mark-up," and "the floor." From this time onwards, rehearsal activities took place either around the table or "on the floor" [See Image 11.8].

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<sup>87</sup> Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History*, 17.

That such territories were created and subsequently acknowledged by performers was clear through the way performers tacitly maintained the boundaries that were created. On the second morning of *Run Rabbit Run* rehearsals Alex and Josef stood at opposite ends of the hall and threw a small soft football back and forth between each other across the space. In doing so they expansively appropriated almost all the space in the hall into their game. What later struck me about this game was that no other use of the hall following this was so expansive. Instead, the hall became a place divided up into a series of smaller territories. The table served as a central base. It was on and around the table that practitioners placed personal belongings and scripts when they arrived each morning. Work frequently started and finished here. The initial week of rehearsal was heavily table-based, involving the cast and Kate, along with writer Alana Valentine and the dramaturg, Chris Mead, considering what changes needed to be made to the play text. The mark-up was, by contrast, the place for physical experimentation, a place where blocking was developed, textual understandings were embodied and the emerging performance was shaped, run and adjusted. The mark-up was a place of physical labour and pronounced performativity. Whenever breaks were called performers rapidly left the mark-up. During breaks the kitchen was utilised for food and drink preparation and conversation, while the porch became the primary social space [See Image 11.9]. In part, the popularity of the porch was due to the amount of smokers in the cast. The other rooms behind the stage were used for private, quiet activities, like costume fittings and the learning of lines (for *Run Rabbit Run* and for other future acting work).

During rehearsals for *Frozen* the interconnecting territories were not as carefully delineated. Instead, the main thrust of rehearsal work took place on the floor, while everything else took place on the periphery [See Image 10.12]. Within the Middle Eastern Dance Studios a great sense of focus existed because there were simply no secondary spaces available; the Princes Highway outside was a very uninviting place, and while Andy and Blair occasionally used the footpath to rehearse lines, it was more pleasant to remain indoors. Actors therefore made do with the areas around the small expanse of floor that had been marked with odd pieces of furniture – plastic stools, odd chairs and a sagging foam couch – and electrical tape as a stage [See

*Image 10.13*]. This involved remaining still and quiet lest their conversation or movement distracted others. With *Frozen*, little reliance could be placed on the amenity of the physical space available, and so more was placed on the intersubjective creation of a supportive social space.

To differing degrees, the spatial logics that developed in both rehearsal rooms separated areas of work from areas of rest, and areas of more performative work from areas of less performative work. Of course, such divisions seem neater when represented here than they did when observed in action. During *Run Rabbit Run* rehearsals the table was used both as a place to sit and eat lunch and as a place for textual study and discussion. Despite this crossover in function, it was never used as a place for the embodiment of character. On occasions when Kate worked separately with individual performers (or, as with Julie and Jody, in a pair), the move from discussing the meaning of characters' utterances to actually determining where lines sat in the performance involved a move from the table to the mark-up. In each rehearsal process then, performers separated out the more performative, difficult and possibly riskier aspects of rehearsal from those that were more sedentary and controllable. Rehearsal is frequently a messy, organic process – Simon Callow describes it as “a compost heap”<sup>88</sup> out of which a flower or weed may grow – but practitioners place the mess, the creative ferment, within more stable, routine actions. Indeed, Richard Schechner's dictum, that “theatre occurs at special times in special places”<sup>89</sup> and is nested within the “the agreement to gather at a specific time and place”<sup>90</sup> applies equally to rehearsal, to the halting, generative proto-performances that performers must engage in before they can create a polished product for public display. On the second day of the rehearsals for *Run Rabbit Run*, Roy made the comment, “It's an interesting stage [in the rehearsal process], everything is being opened up.” But while the text and performative possibilities *were* being opened up, the use of the actual rehearsal space was contrastingly being routinised, being made into a safe place through the embodied actions of the performers. In the second week of *Run Rabbit Run* rehearsals Kate stated, “If we have this week as experimental, then next week we'll have to lock some things in.” That the performers felt free to

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<sup>88</sup> Callow, *Being an Actor*, 173.

<sup>89</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 161.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

experiment was only because at the same time they were bringing into existence a place in which it was relatively safe to do so.

Before turning to the way in which the performers of *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* inhabited Belvoir, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss the discernible effects that the particular rehearsal spaces used did have on the performances that were created. Bearing in mind that performers' prior experiences of performance spaces does, in fact, affect their inhabitation of rehearsal spaces, McAuley has also observed the way "spatial features of the rehearsal room, which may not be part of the set design, are utilized by the actors, even to the extent of becoming a significant part of the spatialization of the action."<sup>91</sup> In particular, referring to two productions of Racine's *Phaedra*, McAuley noted that with both, "the physical realization of the ideas discussed made active use of [...] lines on the floor."<sup>92</sup> The 'lines' that McAuley refers to were unintentional markings on the floor of the rehearsal spaces used. With one production these lines took the form of a large circle inscribed in the floor's linoleum surface. With the other, they took the form of a cross, formed by the combined edges of four plywood sheets laid as a covering over the floor surface.

A few spatial features of the rehearsal spaces used for *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* did have particular effects on the stage blocking that emerged. For *Frozen* a large mirror ran along one side of the marked stage space and represented where the back wall of the Belvoir Street stage would be once the production moved to the theatre [See *Image 10.11*]. Blair remarked that while rehearsing the mirror's position meant that you were "constantly having people in your peripheral." While he found this "disconcerting," the decision by Kate during rehearsals to stage the performance in the round rendered this feature advantageous. The mirror aided performers in their adjustment to having an audience on all sides and helped to develop a circular logic to the blocking.

Blair and Andy, playing Don and Dan, two police officers, had their first rehearsal 'on the floor' at the PACT Theatre in Erskineville [See *Image 10.14*]. PACT is a large warehouse converted into an open adaptable performance space. What was striking

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<sup>91</sup> McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 71.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

about rehearsing here was the actors' use of space. Based around a table, the actors moved back and forth over distances that would clearly be impossible in the Downstairs Belvoir Theatre. Taking Kate's suggestion not to get "too naturalistic" Blair and Andy went over the top with an expansively physical style. "This feels good!" remarked Andy. "Use the whole space," encouraged Kate. When moving to the Middle Eastern Dance Studios, the room available was more constricting and their actions, though pared back, retained an anarchic energy [See Image 10.15]. In the Downstairs Theatre, which offered even less physical space in which to execute the moves they had developed, their performances threatened to overwhelm the space available [See Image 10.16]. "You want the freedom just to go nuts and make it as big as you possibly can," commented Blair later, "It's always easier to confine a performance. It's a lot harder to blossom it out." While the movements were compressed, the pace and energy developed in the more expansive spaces clearly fed through into the more compressed spaces.

With *Run Rabbit Run*, the positioning of the mark-up within the rehearsal venue led to the creation of a pronounced end-on blocking. The Upstairs Belvoir Theatre stage thrusts out into an audience seating area divided into three banks. Transposing this strange geometrical space into a rectangular hall resulted in a wall being located in the approximate position of one of Belvoir's three seating banks. The cast of *Run Rabbit Run* preferred to rehearse facing down the length of the hall, facing those who formed an informal audience at the rehearsals, Kate and Jess (Kate's directing mentoree), Kylie (stage manager), Babs (assistant stage manager) and myself [See Images 11.10 and 11.11]. Interestingly, the resulting neglect of the prompt seating bank persisted through rehearsals and even through the season, despite Kate quite obviously positioning herself (or me) against the wall to simulate an audience. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January, two weeks into the season, Kate wrote as part of her directing notes to the cast:

\*\*\* P-side seating bank (in front of Kylie) – everyone please make sure that you are attending to these folks at least one additional time during your speeches.

Later, at Belvoir, when I was talking to Brenna Hobson, Company B's Production Manager, I asked about whether she thought the choice of rehearsal venue affected the

performances created there. To this she commented, “That bank [the prompt seating bank] is always ignored because people don’t like acting to a wall.” Mark Howett, lighting designer for *Run Rabbit Run* added, “Always sit where the production desk is [...] That’s where the show is made from [...] No one moves from there.”

### *At Belvoir Street*

In a paper entitled “Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space,” Neil Leach draws on the work of Homi Bhabha, Michel de Certeau and Judith Butler to suggest that social practice, especially the “accumulative iteration of certain practices,”<sup>93</sup> activates the potential meaningfulness of architectural form. For Leach, “buildings can be grasped by the manner in which they are perceived – by the narratives of use with which they are inscribed.”<sup>94</sup> Already I have discussed the discourses deployed to construct and explain ‘Belvoir’ and have described how the spatial logics developed during the rehearsals for both *Frozen* and *Run Rabbit Run* made the rehearsal spaces into particularly known places. In this section I present an account of how the performers working on both productions subsequently inhabited the Belvoir Street building and through their inhabitation made sense of that place. Indeed, “through haptic encounters a place and our place within it get made and become familiar.”<sup>95</sup> Leach argues that, “Through a complex process of making sense of place, developing a feeling of belonging and eventually identifying with that place, an identity may be forged against an architectural backdrop.”<sup>96</sup> Importantly for Leach, “As individuals identify with an environment, so their identity comes to be constituted through that environment. This relates not only to individual identity, but also to group identity.”<sup>97</sup> Through the accumulation of repetitive actions – actions that in previous chapters I have demonstrated form such a large part of performers’ practice during the course of a performance season – performers come to identify (at least) their artistic practice with the backstage areas of particular theatre buildings.

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<sup>93</sup> Leach, “Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space,” 285.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>95</sup> Kevin Hetherington, “Spatial Textures: Place, Touch and Prasentia,” *Environment and Planning A: Urban and Regional Research* 35 (2003): 1942.

<sup>96</sup> Leach, “Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space,” 292.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

Working at Belvoir, either Downstairs or Upstairs, informs and affects performers' understandings of what it is to be a performer.

### 1. *Frozen*

Final rehearsals for *Frozen* were held in the Belvoir Street building from Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May up until the opening night on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May. As the company gathered in the Downstairs Theatre for the first time on the Monday afternoon Alan entered and encapsulated the comments of the other performers. Looking at the performance space he exclaimed loudly, "Is that where the seats are? Shit, it's small!" His comment could well have been applied to the Downstairs Theatre dressing room as well, an exceedingly small space for ten cast members.

The Belvoir Street building into which the company had moved contains an idiosyncratic variety of internal spaces that are notable for their interconnection. While allowing the movement of people through the building, this interconnection means that there are no separate circulation systems for the different company functions housed within the one structure. A justified permeability diagram of the Belvoir building [see *Figure 5.1 below*] demonstrates the 'ringy' structure of the Belvoir Street building that supports this interconnection.<sup>98</sup> In the diagram, the circle 'j' represents the position of the Downstairs Theatre. The circle 'k' represents the position of the Downstairs Theatre dressing room. What the diagram demonstrates is the position of the Downstairs Theatre dressing room relative to the other spaces around it. Performers can take one of two possible routes from their dressing room to the Downstairs Theatre. One is to travel via the Upstairs Theatre dressing room ('m') and a short corridor ('n'). This is the usual route taken. The other is to travel via the foyer ('a') and through the same entrance utilised by the audience ('b'). With *Frozen*, both routes were used. To reach the performance space, Eliza, Blair, Eileen and Josef all made various nightly trips through the public space of the Belvoir foyer.

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<sup>98</sup> For an explanation of how this diagram has been created, see chap. 2 pp. 32-36.

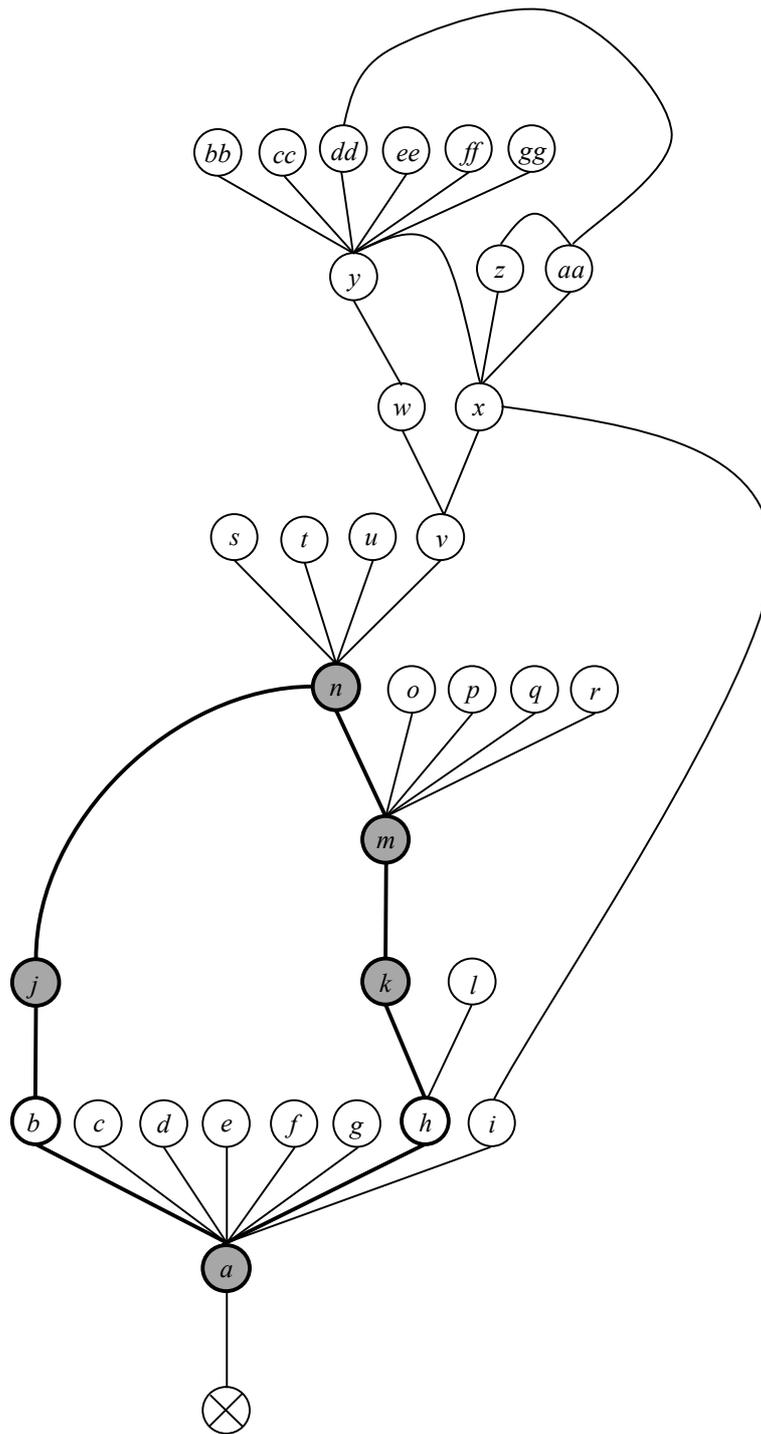


Figure 5.1: A Justified Permeability diagram of the Belvoir Street Theatre

The positioning of the Downstairs Theatre dressing room within the Belvoir Street building means that the performers using it have to pass through intermediate spaces that are occupied and essentially controlled by others, either another cast’s dressing room, or the public space of the building’s foyer, before they can reach their own performance space. In both cases performers must pass through a space of possible

distractions. Furthermore, as Nic P. commented, for a Downstairs Theatre cast, there's "a rule that you are not allowed to be in there [the Upstairs theatre dressing room]." <sup>99</sup> Andy commented that in crossing through this dressing room, "You feel a little bit intrusive." <sup>100</sup> While Eliza remarked that she knew some of the people working in the Upstairs Theatre, "and it's nice to see them and that sort of stuff," she also added,

It can get cluttered and it depends on how serious the other person's show is. If you are doing something silly and they are trying to focus [...] you have to really be respectful of crossing into their path. <sup>101</sup>

"You shouldn't have to cross into another dressing room," commented Andy. For him there is an unnecessary distraction that comes from being, "not just in your play and in your world just walking onto the stage from your dressing room, [instead] you are sort of crossing," [here Andy mimed walking through the Upstairs dressing room] ... "hello ... sorry ..." <sup>102</sup> [he mimed waving to someone he knows].

The most crowded times in the Downstairs dressing room were immediately before and after performances when the bulk of the cast were changing clothes. Nic P. described the bodily sensation at this time as being "all scrunched up to weaving around each other to get dressed." <sup>103</sup> While performers were allocated a space within the dressing room, marked by their name taped to the mirror above a corresponding patch of desk, sheer physical proximity made personal space almost non-existent [*See Images 10.17 and 10.18*]. <sup>104</sup> At such times the physically close and intimate conditions meant a lack of individual privacy for all involved; each of the performers could openly observe each other's personal habits, routines and physiques. <sup>105</sup> Consequently, one female cast member chose to change in the toilets instead. Blair

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<sup>99</sup> Papademetriou, interview.

<sup>100</sup> Rodereda, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Logan, interview.

<sup>102</sup> Rodereda, interview.

<sup>103</sup> Papademetriou, interview.

<sup>104</sup> This made my position as an observer *within* the room somewhat problematic.

<sup>105</sup> The dressing room lacked aural privacy as well. Anyone in the adjacent office space could hear the performers' conversations. One evening Josef, was mid-way through a joke about how another actor performing at Belvoir used a voice that sounded like the character Cartman from the television show *South Park*. "But it was a good show," he summarised, before adding quietly, "you have to be careful what you say here."

attempted to express the sheer lack of room by describing the scene after opening night:

I mean here, there's not ten of us out there: last night was a shit fight. Did you get in there just after we went down, we came down? Un-fucking-believable. Just bodies everywhere, arms, clothes, flying all over the fucking place. You couldn't swing a cat. There was no way. Absolute nightmare. It took twenty five minutes to get out of there individually when in any other theatre it would have only taken you five just to get changed, have the champagne and fuck off into the foyer ... but nah, twenty five minutes just because you're working your way over sweating bodies.<sup>106</sup>

The lack of room in the Downstairs dressing room was made all the more obvious by the situation that, for the first few nights of *Frozen*, performance artist William Yang was the sole performer using the Upstairs dressing room. "The Company B dressing room is huge!" cried one performer during the opening night party, "and it's just for one man!"<sup>107</sup>

To cope with the small amount of space available for pre-performance preparations, the cast of *Frozen* developed various tactics. Foremost amongst these was the sharing of space, with performers varying their preparations and routines to fit with the routines of others. Andy, who was not required in the opening scenes, would wait until after the performance had begun to enter the dressing room and get changed. Blair chose to do the opposite, "getting in early, getting changed a little early, just making sure you're not in anyone's way."<sup>108</sup> Eliza developed an economical way of preparing:

If I have to go from my seat to where the costumes are hanging I'll plan one move, not three. I have to get a couple of costumes, but I'll get it all at one time. So it means I have to move less between areas, which is funny. You just end up doing those kinds of things though, which makes it more time efficient.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Cutting, interview.

<sup>107</sup> The contrast between the two dressing rooms prior to the premiere performance of *Frozen* was extreme. In one corner of the Upstairs dressing room William Yang sat quietly waiting for his call to the stage. In the Downstairs dressing room the performers for *Frozen* were literally packed in, all seemingly engaged in raucous conversation.

<sup>108</sup> Cutting, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Logan, interview.

Another tactic was the use of humour. Performers made fun of the fact that Daryl Wallis, the pianist who supplied the music for each performance, did not have a marked space in the dressing room. In jest someone handwrote his name on a scrap of paper and stuck it to an oddly undersized wooden chair in a corner of the dressing room.<sup>110</sup> Banter and niggling were also carried on in a prevailingly light-hearted fashion; many of the performers imitated each other's distinctive lines or mannerisms as a way of generating laughter.<sup>111</sup> Eileen commented on this in relation to my presence as an observer in the dressing room:

I thought how it must have been for you to watch that and I thought, it's really embarrassing, you know, the stupid things we say to each other and the liberties that we take with each other too, in a way, especially in that small space.<sup>112</sup>

However, the liberties taken and the 'stupidity' engaged in helped to largely ameliorate any ill effects from the lack of privacy and the general discomfort that was experienced. Instead, humour encouraged the performers to open out to each other rather than defensively withdraw away from each other.

Performers also utilised alternative spaces in which to prepare. On one occasion, during dress rehearsals, Andy used the floor of the then vacant Upstairs dressing room to stretch. The stage of the Downstairs Theatre was often used as a place to do vocal and physical warm-ups as well as to run lines. Here the cast were able to pursue their own preparations comfortably; the space enabled them to be with each other without being crowded together. Prior to one performance, Nick Brown and Eileen stretched on the floor of the theatre while Nic P. and Eliza stood nearby, running through the lines for one of their scenes. Jerusha played a Stevie Wonder album over the theatre's sound system, adding a pervading groove to the preparations. Alan, Andy and Blair sat in the rows of audience seating talking.

Nic P. engaged in one of the more interesting uses of space outside the dressing room. In the final scene of *Frozen*, his character Gordon is reduced to tears, confronting the

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<sup>110</sup> This chair served as the position from which I was able to observe the performers in their dressing room.

<sup>111</sup> Although there was one occasion when the banter between two members of the cast went too far and offence was taken.

<sup>112</sup> Eileen Camilleri, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 12 June 2003.

breakdown of his life and his imminent execution. To prepare for this scene, Nic would go to the building's laundry room ('t' in Fig. 5.1) [See Image 10.19], lock the door, turn off the light and sit in the dark. This, he explained was because the dressing room and other areas "can be quite distracting as the natural desire is to be involved with everyone."<sup>113</sup> By midway through the *Frozen* season a Company B production of *Macbeth* had opened in the Upstairs Theatre. The members of this cast "had a tendency to want to chat if they bumped into [you] along corridors etc, so it [was] easier to be invisible than to be thought of as a wanker!"<sup>114</sup> Nic P. explained that in the laundry he received no interruptions because no one was aware of his presence:

The darkness made me feel like I had been in solitary, etc. and I would try and visualise Gordon's physical state, as well as his emotional state – being abused, tortured, feelings of being betrayed by Mr Jones and Ellen. I would also try and meld this with how I would feel in the same situation. I would also hum (quietly) a piece of music that has always been a very emotional trigger for me.<sup>115</sup>

In doing this, Nic P. tactically made use of the spatial resources available to him to create an environment conducive to his personal preparation, lessening the impact of the crowding and the lack of privacy by finding a corner away from everyone else. The darkness in particular was a great aid in this:

Again, the darkness I think is more about creating an environment where there are no externals interfering with where you are to get emotionally. Even in a non-descript room you might wander to what is on the walls – the texture, the colour, is the paint peeling off, the light is bright or too low, you look at your shoes, anything. In the dark, you concentrate on what your character is feeling, there is nothing you can see, or be disturbed by.<sup>116</sup>

The tendency to find or adapt spaces within the building that were conducive to the individual needs of the performer was one that many of the cast displayed. Once *Macbeth* had opened in the Upstairs Theatre Eliza started using the small sound lock through which audience members enter the Downstairs Theatre, as a quick-change

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<sup>113</sup> Papademetriou, "Re: Thank You." It was in this context that Papademetriou commented, "there is nowhere that is too private, and one can be labelled as pretentious if one asks not to be disturbed 'because I am preparing' – even amongst serious acting casts." See chap. 4, p. 144.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

area. She did this to avoid crossing the foyer in her *Frozen* costume (a nightie and dressing gown) during the interval for *Macbeth*. At this time the foyer was typically crowded with patrons.

During the two week season the dressing room was the major node for offstage cast interaction. This situation developed both because the dressing room was midway between the two entrances to the Downstairs Theatre and because it was the only space within the building where the cast could legitimately linger without interruption. Upon entering the dressing room one evening, looking for fellow cast members, Jerusha asked, “Have they gone out to go in?” This question revealed her understanding of the building around her – one goes *out* of the dressing room to go *in* to the performance space. Alternatively, one goes *out* of the theatre to go back *in* to the dressing room. In such a formulation the corridors and spaces in between do not feature as places in their own right, merely recessive zones of utility, means to an end. While the stage space was the main point of focus for the actors, the dressing room was a comparatively safe space within the building where one could recuperate and reflect on how the performance was progressing.<sup>117</sup>

During the two week season of *Frozen*, the cast’s buoyant sociality, in the face of inadequate physical conditions, was the dominant feature of their inhabitation of the Belvoir Street building. With the constant jokes and banter, the social environment echoed the dynamics of theatrical improvisation.<sup>118</sup> Socially, performers made constant ‘offers’ to each other, with the offers made by one cast member being readily accepted and built on by others. Prior to one evening’s performance Alison, the Downstairs Theatre Technical Manager, announced over the tannoy that the house was ‘live.’ “It’s alive!” cried Blair and Josef in mock horror, subsequently performing Frankenstein imitations. By a series of lateral shifts this play-acting built into a group sing along of ‘It’s got to be perfect’ amongst the assembled cast. Blair and Andy conducted ‘speed runs’ of all their lines in the dressing room each night, often

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<sup>117</sup> See chap. 4, p. 146 for a brief description of the monitoring activities of the *Frozen* cast.

<sup>118</sup> In particular, the cast’s interactions were strikingly similar to the games “Group yes” or “Yes and” outlined by educator Keith Johnstone in *Impro for Storytellers*. Both games are variations on a common theme: an offer is made (say ‘let’s dance!’) to which the others involved respond with ‘yes!’ and engage in the suggested action. Such a game is designed to overcome the tendency for individuals to respond negatively (to ‘block’) in the face of uncertainty. Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 34.

deliberately changing lines to make a joke: “It’s got 23 *and a third* percent unemployment.” A speech impediment put on by one (“It’s a *wugly* road”) would be picked up and then altered by another. When Blair added sound effects Andy followed suit. Nic P. and Eliza also engaged in hyperbolic line runs. Instead of the line, ‘But you kept saying you wanted to paint the room,’ Eliza substituted: “But you kept saying you wanted to paint *me in the nude*.” Likewise, to the line, ‘You kept coming, knocking on my door,’ Eliza added to the line in a way consistent with her character’s view of Nic P.’s character: “*like dirty little dog*.” These instances occurred amidst a prevailing mood of building positively upon offers, with performers provoking and engaging with each other, enjoying their own creativity.

Out of the socialising that occurred backstage on *Frozen* the concept of ‘singing the body electric’ developed. In the words of Eileen, this was, “A gauge. Because what happened is I just started singing songs from *Fame* one night and ‘I Sing the Body Electric’ for me came to mean ... how good I’m feeling...”<sup>119</sup> To this she added, “I also knew that it gave Blair the shits [...] and because I discovered that it gave Blair the shits I thought it might be good to play it all the time to *really* give him the shits.”<sup>120</sup> Other members of the cast soon picked up on Eileen’s gauge, and each night someone would ask her prior to the performance, “Electric?” Eileen would then assess the mood: “It’s varied between a couple of ‘No Frills Double A’ batteries down to ‘BBQ beads’ ...”<sup>121</sup> Alternatively, after a particularly good performance, the cast would claim that they had ‘sung the body electric.’ ‘Singing the body electric’ came to represent the level of positive intersubjective energy that the cast could muster.<sup>122</sup> If, as Juhani Pallasmaa has suggested, basic architectural experiences have a verb form, then during the course of their season in the Downstairs Theatre, the cast of *Frozen* made use of their sociality to engage in a project of surmounting the spatial constraints they encountered.

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<sup>119</sup> Camilleri, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> In Eileen’s words it was her way of “just gauging the level of electricity that we’re feeling.” Ibid.

## 2. *Run Rabbit Run*

For the performers working on *Run Rabbit Run*, the transition from rehearsal venue to theatre was a time of particular uncertainty.<sup>123</sup> The transition began with two full days of technical rehearsal on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> December, followed by a dress rehearsal on 2<sup>nd</sup> January and four preview performances leading up to the opening night on 7<sup>th</sup> January. Georgina later reflected on this transitional period: “The first few days of us being in here I felt really vulnerable and I felt that people were getting narky with each other, and it was like the politeness had gone, but there was an element of trust that had gone.”<sup>124</sup> She attributed this, in part, to the sense that “we were foreign to it all of a sudden and before we’d owned it.” The uncertainty of this period also increased the difficulty I had observing backstage practices. Before the first preview performance I asked Eliza whether going backstage was possible. “Tonight?” she exclaimed, “Wait till we’ve had our first audience ... Wait till we’ve been told how good we are.” I was effectively excluded until the cast were reassured by a successful public performance.

The Upstairs Theatre dressing room was the base for the actors’ inhabitation of Belvoir. Prior to the actors’ arrival, Kylie had allocated each individual a place within the dressing room. The dressing room is divided into two sections by a central partition with a continuous bench and large mirrors installed on both sides. Following established practice Kylie allocated one side to the male members of the cast [*See Image 11.12*] and one to the female members [*See Image 11.13*], allowing a degree of privacy. Each marked place possessed a chair and a corresponding area of bench and mirror. Places were marked with pieces of paper bearing each actor’s name as well as a clear plastic box, also marked with their name. As was evident in Figure 5.1 and my discussion of *Frozen*, the Upstairs dressing room is positioned in a particularly dominant position in the building’s circulatory system; anyone who wishes to move through the backstage areas of the building will almost inevitably have to pass through it. During the season of *Run Rabbit Run*, performers working in the Downstairs Theatre constantly passed through the Upstairs Theatre dressing room.

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<sup>123</sup> For the cast and production crew this uncertainty stemmed from continuing textual revisions as well as adjustments to the blocking, lighting and sound that effectively turned the only scheduled dress rehearsal into yet another technical rehearsal.

<sup>124</sup> Naidu, interview.

Some were comfortable, greeting those in the cast they knew, while others felt the need to excuse their frequent presence. One performer muttered somewhat apologetically, “in again, out again, in again” as he passed. Two corollaries of this situation were a lack of privacy and a lack of security. The Upstairs Theatre dressing room served as a corridor and could not be adequately secured against intrusion by a range of relative strangers.<sup>125</sup>

Upon arrival at the theatre before each performance, cast members almost inevitably travelled to the dressing room first to deposit any personal belongings they had with them. While the dressing room served as the dedicated space for a variety of functions (to sit, to reflect, to access toilet and shower facilities, to change into costumes, to apply makeup), its small size and communal set up also required performers to make adjustments to their behaviour so as to accommodate each other’s needs. The female side of the room was just large enough to allow all the four female members of cast to sit at the same time, but the space on the male side was not sufficient. Instead, Josef and Alex took turns standing against the bench, only able to sit in their allocated chair when the other wasn’t.

The dressing room was available to cast members as a base, but was utilised differently by each of them. Notably, the female members of the cast spent more time as a group in the dressing room than did their male counterparts, and their side of the dressing room was correspondingly more decorated than the male side [*See Images 11.12 and 11.13*]. Only the female members of the cast wore makeup on stage each evening, and this required more time spent in front of the mirror. Of the female cast members, only Eliza smoked, and the fact that all the male cast members were smokers meant that only male cast members, frequently joined by Eliza, spent time at the stage door having a cigarette before performances and during the interval. As a group, however, the cast made most use of the dressing room upon first arriving at the theatre and then in the immediate lead up to the five-minute call and the call to

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<sup>125</sup> The security of performers’ dressing rooms is a major issue in many theatres. At Belvoir, the passage through the Upstairs Theatre dressing room of performers working in the Downstairs Theatre emphasises the shared usage of the space. During *Run Rabbit Run* performers would bring their valuables (wallets and mobile phones) up to the greenroom and place them in a bag that Babs, the assistant stage manager, kept in the control box.

beginners. At such times it was not uncommon to find most of the cast making final adjustments to their appearance, reading, or chatting quietly.

Prior to each performance, most of the cast arrived early at the theatre, a practice that continued throughout the season. They therefore spent a great deal of time simply within the building. Some of this time was specifically devoted to preparation, but a large amount was given to more everyday activities, socialising, reading, and waiting; just passing the time.<sup>126</sup> Alex and Wayne were often the first of the performers to arrive, with Wayne sometimes arriving up to two hours' before the commencement of the performance.<sup>127</sup> Given that performances started nightly at eight o'clock, most of the cast were in the building by seven o'clock each evening.

Despite the time spent at the theatre before performances, the production of *Run Rabbit Run* did not require any pronounced level of physicality from the cast. As a verbatim theatre production the performance was distinctly presentational and contained a great deal of directly addressed monologue material; there were very few instances of actual dialogue or significant character interaction. The physical and vocal preparations of the performers reflected the production's comparatively low-key requirements. Of the cast, only two performers, Jody and Georgina, engaged in regular physical routines. In both cases Jody and Georgina would arrive at the theatre, and change into another set of clothes before entering the performance space. Jody's preparation was a fifteen-minute yoga routine on a towel on the stage; Georgina would perform three yogic 'salutes to the sun' and then lie on her back with her legs aligned vertically up a wall doing breathing exercises. Neither Jody nor Georgina did these routines before every performance, but when they did so, each routine involved a significant amount of repetition. Jody's routine always took place in a period immediately before the fifteen-minute call and she consistently placed her mat in the same position on the stage. Georgina would seek out different places within the performance space, but always wore the same set of clothes.

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<sup>126</sup> Standing at the stage door one evening Russell commented, "There's a lot of boredom in theatre."

<sup>127</sup> When I asked why he was consistently so early Wayne explained, "all my work at the moment is around this area." He found that it was easier to go straight to the theatre rather than head home first. Alex's reply was that "the Sutherland Shire [where he lives] is over yonder and if there's an accident I don't want to be late [...] I have a phobia of being late."

Amongst the other performers, vocal warm-ups were common during the initial week of public performances as the cast made conscious efforts to understand and adjust to the acoustical properties of the Upstairs Theatre. On one evening Eliza lay on the floor at the rear the auditorium and projected her voice into the room; Alex circled the stage with a cup of coffee in hand, quietly talking through one of his speeches. Occasionally he would look out into the empty rows of seats and deliver particular lines to those points. Wayne, too, walked across the stage delivering his monologues. In subsequent weeks, Wayne, more so than other cast members, would emerge into the performance space, sometimes to deliver monologues, other times to warm-up his face with tongue twisters (repeating ‘red leather, yellow leather’ and ‘nine naughty nuns’).

A great deal of the pre-performance preparation for *Run Rabbit Run* was seemingly internal, what in Chapter Four I referred to as ‘psychological.’ Rather than overt physical or vocal preparations, many of the cast spent time pacing, wandering, sitting and occasionally quietly rehearsing the delivery of their lines. Roy, in particular, quietly padded about the greenroom and its associated corridors, often emerging into the performance space to simply look at the auditorium, or to sit gazing back at the empty stage. In such a context, mundane activities, like dressing and applying jewellery, became important facets of the pre-performance preparations. These were important precisely because of the routine nature of the way they were done. They occurred before every performance and they occurred in remarkably similar ways.

In an interview Wayne described how his own preparations for *Run Rabbit Run* differed from those for a previous Company B production, Richard J. Frankland’s *Conversations With the Dead*:

Well I need to ... basically what I need to do is I go over some bits that troubled me the night before, I do a general voice warm up, which isn’t too much for this show. It just really changes with show and character for me. I don’t have a set thing I can do because it doesn’t suit some roles; it doesn’t suit some energy of the play. Like with *Conversations* I do a big warm up; with this one, nah, probably fifteen per cent of that warm up, maybe eight per cent actually, when I think about it. So, I’ll make sure I do a little warm up of my voice and my face, my body. If I’m sore I’ll just sort of stretch. I’ve got a bit of a sore neck, so I’ll stretch that. But other than that, yeah I’ll make sure I

do that; have a cup of tea or coffee before the show. That's just probably out of habit. Have a cigarette. And make sure I make contact with all the actors. It'd be 'oh g'day Julie' and that might be it. You know. But I'll make sure I have a bit of contact with everybody.<sup>128</sup>

Wayne's comments only hint at the degree to which his reflections on the previous night's performance, his smoking, his cup of tea or coffee, and his contact with the other actors developed into habitually performed actions. Other than usually being the first cast member to arrive, each evening Wayne's dressing was his most obvious routine. He would first put his pants and shirt on, but then would always wait until after his pre-performance cigarette before putting on his tie. Likewise, Russell went through a dressing routine: pants, socks and shoes would be followed by wetting and dressing his hair, putting his shirt on and then combing his hair. Communally, what one performer described as "little rituals" developed out of performers' routine interactions. Georgina reported that she "always put Eliza's bracelet on and Jody's necklace on" before each performance. This was just one of numerous "little things which just started as people needing help and then became a ritual of us coming together to start."<sup>129</sup>

One of the significant 'coming together' that occurred nightly was the gathering of performers at the stage door prior to performances and at interval to have a cigarette, chat and watch audience members arrive (or depart) [See *Image 11.14*]. This habit seemed to have been transposed directly from the gatherings on the porch during rehearsals. The stage door at Belvoir is recessed, allowing performers to be outside and yet not obviously on the street. That the *Run Rabbit Run* costumes consisted of common street attire also allowed the actors to be in full view of the arriving audience without being obvious. Prior to performances, these gatherings took place either before the half hour was called, or later, at around the fifteen-minute call. As a social interaction there was nothing remarkable about such gatherings. Up to half the cast – almost always those who smoked – would discuss the weather, the previous night's performance, or anything else that struck them. The only aspect particular to the performance they were about to present was the way those at the stage door watched

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<sup>128</sup> Blair, interview.

<sup>129</sup> Naidu, interview.

and discussed the audience. Any celebrities (including those whose words formed part of the text of the performance) were spotted and their presence was passed on to all members of the cast. Two incidents allowed me an insight into what the performers themselves thought about what they were doing there. One night Russell's two sons were outside the theatre and were leaving. As Russell waved goodbye he joked, cigarette in hand, "Daddy's doing his warm-up now." On a wet night some audience members waited in the alcove to be let in via the stage door (which doubles as an entrance for wheelchair-bound patrons). As Alex, Russell and Josef opened the doors, one of the patrons asked, "Do you want us to move?" "No, no," said Wayne, "we're just relaxing." Indeed, they were just relaxing, but in a particularly set way that constituted a nightly preparatory routine.

The five-minute call and the call to beginners produced a clear group response. The five-minute call prompted the beginning of the movement of performers from the dressing room downstairs to the greenroom at stage level [*See Image 11.15*]. It was here that the degree to which performers were aware of others' routines became clear. Georgina highlighted the way "certain people will talk to certain people but other people will leave other people alone ... not because they like other people more but because that's their way of warming up."<sup>130</sup> Shortly before one evening's performance Wayne sat next to me in the greenroom and told me to watch because Eliza and Jody would be the last cast members to heed the call to beginners and enter the greenroom. His prediction proved correct. When Jody emerged last Wayne whispered "Watch ... she'll stand in front of the mirror for a minute." Jody did this, checking her make up and costume in a mirror. Then she flicked her hair over her head and commenced to bind it. "Like a peacock" whispered Wayne, "she's nervous, so she does her hair." He then checked my watch, happy that his prediction turned out to be accurate.

The move from the dressing room up to the greenroom was accompanied by an increase in the energy and excitement of the cast. The proximity to both the start of the performance, to the audience and to each other added a certain charge to the atmosphere. Once in the greenroom performers located their props (bags, water bottles, newspapers), checked that they were all accounted for, and retrieved any

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

coats, scarves or hats they needed. The call to beginners, and then the call to standby, saw Babs usher them as a group into the tunnel [See *Image 11.16*]. Here a definite order was present: Wayne was always at the front, with Alex and Josef at the rear. Russell always followed Georgina on. The crowding together in the tunnel created a spatial solidarity; as a whispering mass, whatever energy was present always seemed multiplied by the short time spent together in this darkened passage. Indeed, it was the only time, pre-performance, that everyone met. For Russell, this gathering “seem[ed] to gather your energy.”<sup>131</sup> Wayne explained:

There’s definitely a moment before you step onstage where something will happen, or you just look at people. It’s a bit dark there. But yeah, you can feel everybody. It’s just a nice feeling of everyone getting together before we go on. People don’t like to be left behind in the greenroom, we all pack in, then there’s a bit of a murmur and ‘bang,’ we’re on.<sup>132</sup>

For Wayne, this moment of running on was a galvanising moment:

For me, I’m standing next to the green lights and I’m the first person out. I love it. I feel energetic. It might sound a bit weird, but it’s like I’m running on for a football game (which I’ve experienced). I don’t mind that, you get an adrenalin ... I get an adrenalin rush all the time and that’s why I love doing it, doing theatre.<sup>133</sup>

During interval, cast members left the stage and headed directly to the dressing room. While most would stay there, some would travel back up the stairs to the stage door for a smoke. Coming off stage one evening at interval, Josef revealed the degree to which he was aware of the timing of each evening’s performance. He asked Kylie, “How long was it?” “One hour and seven minutes” was Kylie’s response, to which Josef exclaimed, “Fuck off! I’m sure it was one hour nine.” While audience reactions often determined the mood in which the performers were in when they exited, the fact that they were only half way through tempered any exuberance. Immediately following the interval, the second act opened with one of the production’s only obviously dialogic segments. This took place between the mother and daughter pairing of Barbara (Julie) and Marcia (Jody). In preparation for this scene Julie and

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<sup>131</sup> Kiefel, interview, 2004.

<sup>132</sup> Blair, interview.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Jody did a regular run of their lines, sitting side by side in the dressing room during each interval.

At the conclusion of each performance the cast returned *en masse* to the dressing room. Here their change into street clothes was rapid; within minutes they would exit the dressing room. In general, each performer's cool down was private and took a number of forms. De-briefs might occur in the dressing room, or over a drink in the foyer or a shared cigarette outside. If family or friends had been in to see the show then performers remained at the theatre. If not, performers either left the building through the foyer, or directly through the stage door. Without a specific reason holding them to the theatre, they departed.

What I have demonstrated so far is the routine interactions that developed amongst the cast of *Run Rabbit Run* whilst working at Belvoir Street. Such routines were not only in evidence through their re-inscription night after night, but also through the times when they were noticeably absent. Two instances were particularly clear. The first followed the first time the live turf, which covered the stage, was re-laid [See *Image 11.17*]. The new surface was greener, thicker and springier than the previous covering, which had slowly died and then begun to rot. On this occasion the performers' interest in the stage itself was considerable. At first Russell, Georgina and Josef walked about, feeling out the new surface. Wayne tried a few speeches. Even Julie, whose presence on the stage pre-performance was exceedingly rare, walked about, commenting to others about how different it felt. Shortly before that evening's performance Roy explained to me his personal interest in testing out the new stage covering: "We've been doing the performance for so long," he explained, "it's a whole new dynamic [...] my performance, it's very organic, and if one thing shifts it all shifts ... it's very hard to explain."

On another occasion, Wayne was held up in traffic and only managed to arrive at the theatre at the five-minute call. Despite the regular activities of the other performers, his absence was noted: Alex, Russell and Josef stood in the stage door joking about who would deliver which of Wayne's lines. When Wayne finally arrived he rushed straight to the dressing room, changed, and re-emerged. Despite his rush he was

actually on time, and in fact had to wait, as the audience seemingly took longer than usual to be seated. With the call to beginners the cast moved into the tunnel. Suddenly Wayne took off onto the stage yelling “Go Souths!” He ran a few paces, realised no one was with him and quickly retreated back into the tunnel only then to receive the cue to begin. On the day when his routine was completely disordered, Wayne mistakenly ran on early thinking that the cue to enter had been provided.<sup>134</sup>

During the course of their season, the performers on *Run Rabbit Run* generated a collectively tangible way of being within the Belvoir building. During the preview period the assistant stage manager, Babs, commented to me, “Once opening night comes, everything will be set.” It would be incorrect to suggest that backstage activities took on a mechanistically repetitive quality, but what did become entrenched was a certain sensibility, an embodied knowledge for how *this* group inhabited *this* place. What emerged was a particular pattern of behaviour, focussed on an ordered preparation. Interestingly, the objective timing of activities was never the same; certain activities did not always occur at the same time each evening. As well, over the course of the season, physical preparations lessened and the use of the stage as part of pre-performance preparations diminished.<sup>135</sup> But, the various preparations of performers did almost unwaveringly occur in a certain order. The combination of ten individuals doing roughly similar things prior to every performance brought into being a distinct sensibility, a ‘sense of place.’

### *Concluding Remarks: Being an Actor at Belvoir*

In this chapter I have provided descriptions of what it is like to be an actor at Belvoir, outlining the discourses that comprise a particularly strategic and authoritative narrative about Belvoir, as well as providing case studies of the rehearsal and performance of two productions within the Belvoir Street building. For the performers who worked on *Frozen*, the spatial constraints encountered both in the rehearsal spaces they utilised and in the Downstairs Theatre itself required them to generate a

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<sup>134</sup> The cue is provided by means of red and green lights. Wayne later explained to me that he had been confused by some of the red and green lights that made up the set, mistaking one of the onstage green lights for his green cue light.

<sup>135</sup> Both examples of how familiar the performers became with their surroundings and the performance.

certain level of intersubjective energy to make *Frozen* work. Lacking adequate support from the environments they found themselves in, they relied on their sociality to surmount those environments. This reliance on intersubjective energy to surmount constraints, combined with an implicit comparison with the conditions afforded performers working Upstairs, is how the position of ‘fringe’ theatre is manifested materially. The frequent descriptions of ‘fringe’ theatre productions in terms of their energy and vigour (for example, Lyn Wallis’ description of the 2003 B Sharp participants as “excitable guests”<sup>136</sup>) are in fact grounded in ‘fringe’ practitioners’ embodied experiences. For the performers involved in *Run Rabbit Run* in the Upstairs Theatre, being an actor at Belvoir also involved working in relatively poor physical conditions and also reaffirmed the importance of the social aspects of theatre making. By way of contrast with *Frozen*, the cast of *Run Rabbit Run* rehearsed and performed together for over ten weeks; their inhabitation of both rehearsal and backstage Belvoir spaces was more settled, more hestial, involving the development and maintenance of discernible routines over a sustained period of time.

In his ‘Message from Neil’ in the 2004 Company B *Season Book*, Armfield writes of how, before a technical rehearsal for the 2003 Company B production of Martin McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*,

Frank Gallacher, one of our great senior actors, and I were in the cramped “Green Room” (Belvoir’s only backstage space), picking through tins of paint and brushes in the sink for a coffee mug, surrounded by buckets of artificial blood [...] Anyway, I thanked Frank for his patience and his generosity, and he said in his warm Glaswegian: “No need to Neil. I love this company, I love what you have all created here, this Company B – it seems to be held together by respect and love. It brings out the best in all of us.”<sup>137</sup>

The often appalling conditions in which theatre is made at Belvoir means that ‘respect and love’ are *necessary* and ‘the best’ must be brought out of people in order to continue creating work. In the epigraph to this chapter I included a quote in which Armfield suggests that something at Belvoir Street “allows a wonderful complication of empathy.”<sup>138</sup> While Armfield aimed this statement at audiences – he goes on to

<sup>136</sup> Wallis, “There’s No Place Like (Our) Home...”

<sup>137</sup> Armfield, “Message from Neil,” in *2004 Company B Belvoir St Theatre Season Book*, 7-8.

<sup>138</sup> Armfield, “Message from Neil,” in *Company B Belvoir St Theatre 2003*, 8.

write, “you sit and share the actors’ space”<sup>139</sup> – the peculiar constraints of the Belvoir Street building, especially its ‘ringy’ circulation system, communal dressing rooms, stage door opening onto the street and sheer, sheer lack of physical space, provide fertile ground for discourses that emphasise mutuality. In the lived experience of theatre practitioners Belvoir is a place of constant physical proximity to other performers, to the audience, and to the built fabric. Empathy is a necessary companion to the compromise and adaptation that performers must engage in at Belvoir.

At the time of writing, in early 2006, the Belvoir Street Theatre is undergoing renovations that will substantially improve the fabric of the building. Such renovations, arising from a growing perception that the building was simply no longer adequate to the needs of Company B and its audience, demonstrate that perhaps love, respect, and generosity (all born of compromise and sustained through effort) can only last for so long. Justifying the impending renovations in a Sydney newspaper, actor Geoffrey Rush evoked the earlier days of the New Wave, contrasting them with his desire for better facilities now:

Then we didn’t want theatres to be plush and comfortable because the new writing, the Australian sense of identity and performance thrived on the fact that we worked out of church halls and disused warehouses. But as the work gets more mature and sophisticated you want to say to people ‘the arts is not a cottage industry.’<sup>140</sup>

Rush’s comments form part of a new discourse being deployed about Company B Belvoir that substantially alters the established ‘Belvoir story’ and implies an attempt to subtly re-position Belvoir in the wider field. Specifically, Rush expresses a contemporary desire for greater comfort that reflects the ‘maturity’ and ‘sophistication’ of the artwork produced at Belvoir, artwork that he describes as forming part of an ‘industry.’ However, such an apparently laudable desire to reflect status in built form does not always provide performers with more suitable environments in which to create work. In the following chapter I pursue this theme by examining performers’ experiences of the inadequate and inefficient interior of the iconic Sydney Opera House.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Geoffrey Rush quoted in Joyce Morgan, "Grand Script Cuts Church Halls for the Big Stage," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 2004, 5.