

CONSTRUCTING REMNANTS: DETERMINING STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION

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THE FOLLOWING IS A REFLECTION on a short presentation that I gave at the A.D.S.A.2006 Conference as a member of the *Eftermaele* Interest Group Discussion Panel convened by Gay McAuley. McAuley proposed the panel discussion in order to provide a forum for the examination of issues that relate to the documentation of performance with an emphasis on her question of what makes a 'good' recording from the point of view of the performance makers themselves and other end users (analysts, historians, theorists, archivists, publicists, entrepreneurs, funding bodies).

As one of Gay's collaborators in our search for appropriate performance documentation methods, I have been pointing microphones, still cameras and video cameras at performance for more than two decades. By way of stimulating discussion, Gay asked if I could present an outline of what I deemed to be the prerequisites for a 'good' recording of performance and to illustrate my approach to the Interest Group through a case study.

With this in mind, I chose to present a description of the methods used and an analysis of the documentation process employed by Gay and I to make a video recording of the Brink Company's 2004 performance of Sarah Kane's play *4:48 Psychosis* at the Queens Theatre in Adelaide. *4:48 Psychosis* is Sarah Kane's final play, and deals with the complexity of issues that surround the individual and social attitudes and responses to suicide. Brink Company had spent two weeks at the University of Sydney Department of Performance Studies in the Rex Cramphorn Studio exploring the play, the process being observed by researchers and students from the Department. At the same time Gay and I made video recordings of Brink Company's work with a view to developing an effective editing methodology for representing an analysis of their exploration of the play text. The opportunity to record the Adelaide performance provided complementary material for the edit of the video recordings made in the Rex Cramphorn Studio.

Introduction

My approach to the documenting of any performance will commence with a consideration of the following in relation to the way the performance is recorded. The primary questions are: "who is the intended audience?" followed by: "what is their purpose in viewing the recording?" There are no simple answers to these questions. The recording could be viewed by academics as a primary source document for use in teaching and research. There may be a particular area of interest for the academic that requires specific image framing. A producer could use the recording as a resource

for making an edited video promoting a production or providing support for a funding application. Practitioners could use the recording as an aid in the process of remounting their interpretation of the performance or introducing a replacement performer to an existing production. Each intended purpose would ideally require a different approach. The reality, in my situation at least, has been that you don't have the opportunity to record in an ideal situation. If there are multiple potential uses for the recording a compromise between competing needs is the only way to progress. For the majority of the time when documenting performance I have had to work alone. This means that I operate the camera and, apart from setting sound levels prior to the performance and the position of additional microphones if used, the audio takes care of itself.

Having determined the best compromise answers to the "who" and "why" questions, I look to the "how" aspect of the recording task by considering the following points:

- Approach the task of recording the performance with **respect**. By respect I mean that the documentation team should implement protocols prior to the recording that ensure effective communication with all the people involved at all levels in the performance such that you have their documented acceptance and understanding of your methods and intention in recording their performance. Whatever technology and staff are used to make the recording ensure that the impact on the performance environment is minimal. If any aspect of the recording method has the potential to cause a change in the performance routine of stage management or performer either find an alternative or don't do it.
- **Audio**: Place microphones so that you limit the impact of extraneous sound sources on the recording such as air-conditioning and audience noise.
- **Point of view**: Set the camera in a position that is indicative of a real audience sight-line.
- If a **second camera** is used for a wide shot, try and keep the camera points of view as close to one another as possible and thus minimise the potential for creating confusion in the viewer's sense of spatial logic when viewing an edit of the recordings.
- Shot **framing** for the operated camera: Keep the frame as wide as is necessary to include the probable focus of audience attention at any given moment in the performance.

How well do these recording task goals work in practice? The following case study should serve to illustrate some aspects of the pragmatic reality of performance documentation.

Case Study

In this instance the intention was to document the Adelaide performance of *4:48 Psychosis* so as to provide complementary documentation to the recordings we had already made of Brink's initial two week long exploration of Kane's play at the Department of Performance Studies. An additional benefit of this work might be to provide Brink with useful documentation in terms of promoting the production and remounting the performance.

Having communicated with the appropriate people and gained their consent to allow the recording of the performance, I gathered together every item of equipment that I thought I might need. The gear was tested prior to departure and made flight transport ready. This meant making sure that the equipment conformed to the baggage handlers occupational health and safety requirements and that I could carry everything I needed at the same time (I use a light weight fold down hand trolley). Equipment was sorted into items for hand luggage and items for the hold.

I carry the most expensive gear with me as hand luggage and pack my clothing in with the tripods, batteries and cables etc. in the carry all that goes into the hold. I keep a list of the luggage inventory with me while I travel so that I can keep track of where things are when moving through airports and using taxis.

There were problems to solve associated with recording this production that you would never expect to meet in the course of conventional field recording. I had been warned by the director Geordie Brookman that there was a possibility that it would be impossible to obtain a clear sound recording of performance due to the presence of a shower of water raining over the whole performance area for the duration of the performance. There was also a possibility that the water spray would settle on the camera lens and obscure the shot. In situations like this you hope for the best. I thought that I might be able to apply audio filtering to the soundtrack in the edit in an attempt to minimise the audio impact of the water spray. I did go to the trouble of building waterproof covers for both cameras. I also packed wet weather gear for myself as Geordie had suggested that the audience might be issued with umbrellas. I imagined shooting over a forest of glistening, rustling umbrella tops.

The equipment taken to Adelaide anticipated the need for two cameras, an additional sound recording, inundation of self and equipment and the necessary editing gear to allow a quick review of what was shot in any trial recording.

On our arrival in Adelaide, Gay and I introduced ourselves to the production crew and renewed our acquaintance with the cast. We had a quick look at the performance place (Fig. 1) located in the Queen's Theatre in Adelaide, South Australia and spent some time moving around the audience seating examining the different audience points of view. A camera was set up with a wide-angle lens to record that evening's full dress rehearsal in a position immediately behind the audience seating.

Initial
camera
position



Fig. 1. The performance space and audience seating.

On the following day we analysed the recording and determined that two cameras be would used. One camera would provide a fixed wide shot so as to meet the basic requirement for performance analysis by providing a record of the activity in the whole of the place occupied by the performance so that all the action in the performance can be viewed within the one spatial context. A second operated camera would provide mid to close up shots of what was perceived by the camera operator to be the probable audience focus on the performance at any given time. Both cameras were aligned close to a common axis (Fig. 2) that looked across what we had decided was the dominant diagonal axis of the performance space. The wide shot camera was mounted on a modified lighting stand. This rig allows a much higher point of view and a closer alignment with the axis of the sight line of the operated camera than that possible with a conventional tripod. A stereo microphone recording onto a minidisk recorder was mounted on a column behind and above the camera positions as a contingency. All equipment was battery operated. This meant that we didn't have to run power cables through the space, thus reducing potential safety issues for both audience and performer.

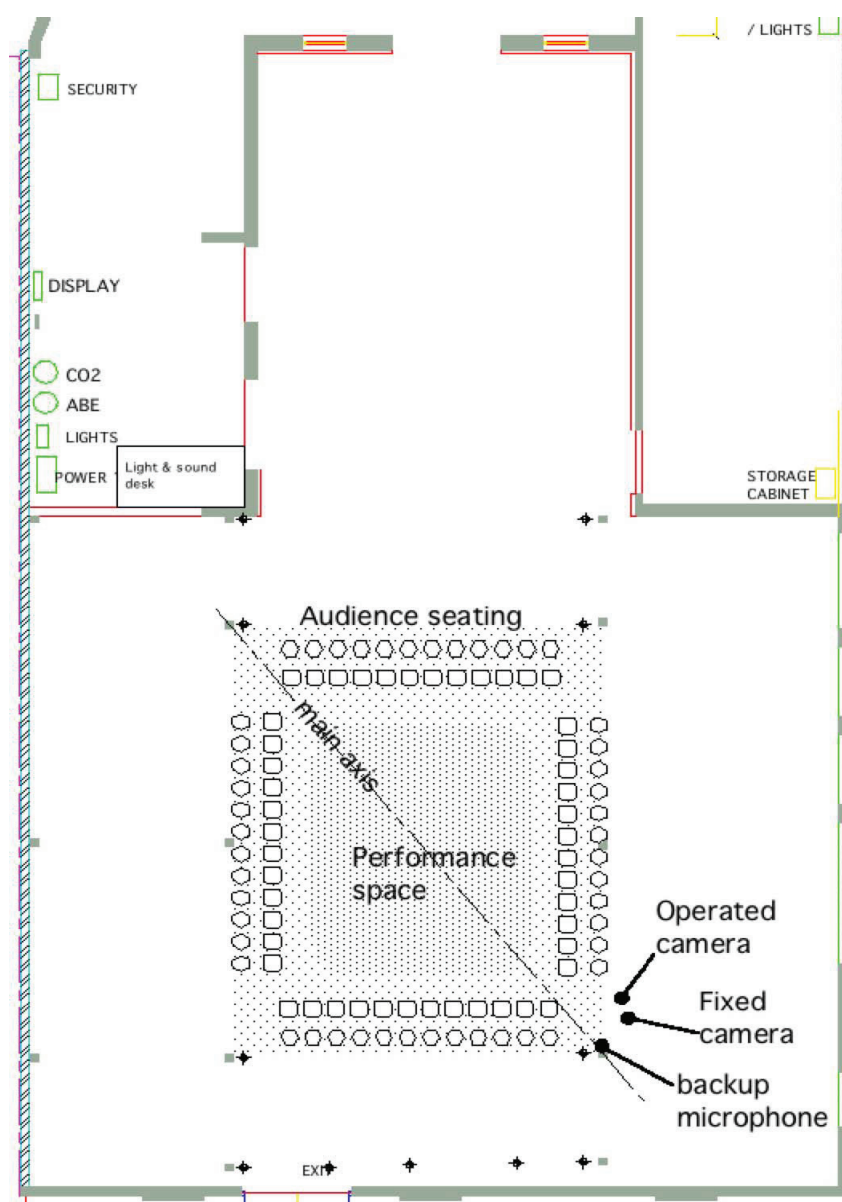


Fig. 2. Plan view of the Queen's Theatre, Adelaide, showing the performance space and positions of recording equipment.

The problem for the camera operator, in this fixed wide shot plus operated shot strategy, is that the shot frame of the operated camera still has to be wide enough to include all the actors actively involved in creating the focus of the performance in any given moment while not being so wide as to duplicate the fixed wide shot. Repeated viewing of the recording of the preview performance gave me some sense of the scope and rate of change of the performer's movement in the space, so that I could anticipate when changes in shot framing would be required. I did not use a shooting script for camera direction as you might use in a better resourced situation, but relied on a list of cryptic headings to summarise my perceptions of the performance segments. If all goes well, the operated camera recording has the potential to capture an indication of the focus of the action that takes place in a performance. Even so, from an analysts point of view, a fixed wide shot that covers the space occupied by audience and cast provides confirmation of who was where in the performance space at any given moment. The two recordings would provide an opportunity to edit between the points of view. The edited document might be more useful to practitioners or producers than a continuous single camera recording in that the edited document may be more conventional to watch.

The shower spray mentioned earlier had the potential to create 'white noise' thus masking the performer's voice. The interior of the Queen's Theatre is more like a large barn than a theatre. It is in essence a found space adapted to the needs of performance. The Queen's Theatre is acoustically very 'live' and does not provide any measure of acoustic isolation from the noise generated by passing traffic. The intrusion of the sound of trucks passing while the performance took place was a cause for concern. A microphone captures all audible sound that is present with none of the selective attenuation provided by our brains sophisticated neural audio processing.

Outcomes

The performance took place with none of my fears being realised. Both camera recordings looked viable in terms of sound and image.

The operated camera recording worked as a continuous shot. Was it a 'good' recording from the point of view of the performance makers themselves and other end users?

Of the performance makers of *4:48 Psychosis*, thus far I have only had the opportunity to ask director Geordie Brookman to consider how useful the unedited recording from the operated camera had been. Geordie had asked for a D.V.D. copy of the recordings for inclusion in a festival application so I provided him with the complete operated shot with the addition of the necessary titles and credits. Months later I e-mailed him asking how things had gone. He replied:

I used the video recording of *4.48 Psychosis* first preview primarily as a diagnostic and practical remounting tool.

When we were faced with the challenge of remounting the production with three new cast members out of four and with only 10 days rehearsal, the video played a vital role.

It allowed me to check against my blocking notes from the previous production and provided the new actors with a physical record of the show prior to the start of rehearsals.

Perhaps most importantly it provided a record of the previous production that was emotionally distanced from the show itself.

This allowed us to discover mistakes, inaccuracies and weaknesses in the piece that I may not have been able to discover otherwise.

In correcting these and combining input from new performers I think we ended up with

a stronger production second time round. While it is never pleasant to watch theatre on video it certainly can be useful.

On the basis of Geordie's response, it is fair to say that in his particular context the unedited documentation provided by the recording was "good" for the performance maker in that it may have helped the acceptance of the production by the festival's producers and provided the opportunity for Geordie and the performers to improve their interpretation of the play. For Gay and myself, the recordings of the performance have been useful as an integral part of our attempt to document the process of Brink Company's exploration of the play text. The performance recordings have provided the opportunity to show an indication of the performance outcome of Brink's endeavours and to illustrate the contrast between the hypothetical performance possibilities created in the exploratory workshop and the performance outcome tempered by the pragmatics of production.

Observations

What of the other of the potential users: the historians, theorists, archivists, publicists, entrepreneurs and funding bodies? Can an unedited video recording in and of itself constitute a "good" recording of the performance event?

On a number of occasions I have observed a camcorder being used to record a performance. Enquiring what the recording will be used for I am told, almost apologetically, that the recording is for the archive, just a record of the show. Quite possibly, the humble recording may turn out to be the only trace of a culturally significant event.

What could be done to enhance the potential of the recording as Efermaele? Remembering the translation; "that which will be said afterwards", what can be said afterwards about a performance on the basis of the information provided by the recording?

In the instance of the *4:48 Psychosis* recording, will the viewer who doesn't have the benefit of having attended the performance comprehend that the performers worked through the whole show under a rain of fine water mist? The answer is no, due to the inability of the lens to pick up that level of fine detail.

Will the viewer understand that the audio distortion heard at the beginning of the recording is not a technical problem but an attempt on the part of the soundscape designer to evoke a particular atmosphere for the audience?

Will the viewer appreciate that the contrast in the image was determined by the limitations of the camera technology resulting in a much more dramatic and moody lighting effect in the recording than that perceived by the audience on the night of the performance?

There also is nothing in the recording to indicate the unusual nature of the audience demographic attending that night's performance in that the audience was comprised almost entirely by members of the South Australian Psychiatry Association who held a forum to discuss the production with the cast immediately after the performance.

Conclusion

The practice of video recording as a means of performance documentation has been eloquently criticised by many prominent theorists from the earliest days of performance recording. Gay McAuley has stated, for example, that "[t]he recording and notation of theatrical performance are at best problematical undertakings and one has to accept from the outset that theatrical performance is essentially unrecordable" (1986, 3), while for Jacqueline Martin and Willmar Sauter,

the analysis of a production, which one has only seen on video, might be very interesting, but it is not—in the strict sense of the term—a performance analysis. It reflects our experience in front of a television screen (1995, 112).

Denise Varney and Rachel Fensham offer an alternative interpretation:

[w]e are not saying that the video is objective, but that different researchers can see the same record and produce different analyses, of which none is more authoritative than any other. And with video one is reminded of the social and historical context of the performance through costumes, hairstyles and accents, as well as laughter and noises of the audience. These details are often lost in the subtext of memory (2000, 92).

It is easy to think that a video recording of performance is adequate insurance to counter the potential inaccuracy of memory and provide a cultural record for posterity. The unedited video, while useful as an aid to memory, cannot of itself provide a viewing context. Understanding of the environment in which the performance was recorded and knowledge of the elements that underpin the production depicted in the recording require more information than that contained in an unedited recording. Varney and Fensham quote Barba as complaining that:

the video is considered to be a heavily mediated, impoverished image which suffers from the loss of the multiple foci for the spectator. There is a loss of information about the *mise-en-scène*. It is more heavily framed and the gaze is constructed through the eye of the camera. The specificity accorded to the video appears as a poverty of representation, compared with the ‘richness’ attributed to the theatre (ibid).

In view of such considered criticism, you may wonder if it is at all possible to make a ‘good’ recording of performance? I am inclined to think, despite having invested decades of my working life generating video recordings of performance, that an unedited video recording of a performance is a poor trace of the event for those who did not witness the performance. This situation brings to mind a reference to comment made by the Catalan cellist and Anti Fascist Pablo Casals, on the occasion of his 80th birthday; “the situation is hopeless—let us make the next step” (Falzon 2006/7, 10).

What is the next step in this situation? We need to accept the inherent inadequacy of whatever attempts we make to video record performance and move on. I would argue that in preference to making ‘good’ recordings of performance, we should be attempting to make ‘good’ records of performance events. A video recording needs to be framed within a collection of other related information to allow the viewer to understand the context in which the recording was made. There is so much information and knowledge about the making of performance and the performance itself that is lost to practitioners and performance analysts due to the acceptance of the notion by people making the recording that a video recording provides us with a document that serves as a record replete for posterity. Documentors must, therefore, be proactive in their approach to documentation, to seek out the opportunities to gather any of the many kinds of documentation that could be associated with a video recording as part of the record of the performance event:

- site, stage & building plans and photographs;
- prompt copy;
- director’s notes;
- reviews;
- design drawings;
- production still photographs;

- publicity photographs;
- financial statements;
- acquittals to funding bodies;
- interviews with cast & production team; and
- company histories.

This information, once gathered, can be assembled around the video as part of a performance record such that some of the richness attributed by Barba to the theatre can be conveyed to the person viewing the record.

What I am suggesting involves a considerable amount of effort and investment of resource for the individual and the institution beyond simply pointing a camera at a performance. The application of digital technology to the task of information management provides a powerful set of tools for constructing a range of accessible record types from on-line digital databases to D.V.D.. The digital technologies now available for information management provide an opportunity to redress some of the deficiencies in performance documentation already mentioned. If we are to leave behind useful cultural artefacts that can generate substantial insights into our cultural history, we need to make the effort to lift our game.

References

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