



Paul Dwyer, Laura Ginters & Gay McAuley: Rehearsal as an Oral Space

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, welcome to the Salon.

Today we host three interlocutors, all of whom are affiliated to and partly responsible for the vibrant research culture of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney.

Gay McAuley lectured on theatre and film in French before co-founding Performance Studies as an interdisciplinary centre at the University of Sydney in 1989. Throughout the 1970s and '80s she worked to establish modes of collaboration between academics and theatre practitioners, and in the 1990s she pioneered the application of ethnographic methodologies to the study of rehearsal processes. She is the author of the pivotal, award-winning volumes *Space in Performance* (1999) and *Not Magic But Work* (2012). Since retiring in 2002, she has continued to contribute to the field, and is currently based in London.

Paul Dwyer returned to University in the mid-1990s after almost a decade of professional theatre work, mostly as an actor, animateur, director or dramaturg in the field of youth and community theatre. Moving from an interest in Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, his research has examined the notion of reconciliation in social performance, from analyses of protest actions through to studies of village-based ritual reconciliation ceremonies in Papua New Guinea. Paul has a strong track record of developing creative practice-as-research through his involvement with professional theatre companies such as Version 1.0 and Belvoir St Theatre, and has co-devised a number of critically acclaimed documentary theatre pieces.

Laura Ginters lectures in the Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney. She has a background in Germanic Studies, and her early research examined female characters in, and female (actors' and directors') interpretations of Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*. Laura has worked at Playworks, the national women performance writers' network, was Associate Director of the International Theatre Institute, and has also worked for Opera Australia. She translates for the stage and works as a dramaturg, and has had articles published locally and internationally in the areas of writing for performance, historical and contemporary rehearsal, feminism and theatre, translation, performance analysis and Indigenous theatre.

In this conversation, Laura, Gay and Paul discuss the Australian theatre and research scene vis à vis uses of speech and sound in performance, thinking through dramaturgy, ethnography and rehearsal as interrelated practices, methods and spaces of exploratory orality. They reflect together on the beginnings of the Sydney approach to studying rehearsal, and comment on how that framework has been extended beyond Western practices, supplying numerous fascinating examples of contemporary artists working with sound, space, amplification and radio.

This Salon conversation was recorded on 10th July 2020 on Zoom, between Sydney and London.

[00:03:41] SALON

Gay McAuley: Okay, well, so hello you two! We should say this conversation is taking place across time zones and continents and here it's eight in the morning, so that's really quite uncivilised and back there it's five o'clock or half past five and you're having a nice cup of tea, I see. So our conversation is going to be basically about the methodologies that we've developed and the procedures that we've developed in Sydney for documenting and observing rehearsal process, the creative process in theatre performance of all sorts that we've been doing for quite a long time now – and you guys are the second generation of scholars who've been engaged in this work. So we're going to take a historical look at it,



we're going to look at the genesis of the work. But for the moment let me just throw over to Laura, who's going to actually introduce an example of the kind of documentation that we've been interested in doing.

Laura Ginters: Thanks Gay, and it's lovely to be with you and Paul today. I would like to introduce the work of Theatre Kantanka, and their project *The Obscene Madame D*. We thought it would be good to top and tail this Salon with some work done by practitioners here in Australia and to open with a company who have had a long connection with the Centre for Theatre & Performance Studies – Department of Theatre & Performance Studies now. Theatre Kantanka have worked with us for probably 20 years now, and this is the most recent project that they did with us, it was the major project for our third year rehearsal studies students – we'll talk more about that core unit in a little while – and it was developed in the Rex Cramphorn Studio, our studio space where artists work year-round. They rehearsed and developed their piece in front of a group of third year students, and that was in 2016, in the middle of 2016, and the show was then further developed and went on to a public season in April 2018, and we have a lovely clip of that work for you here.

[00:05:58 to 00:07:55] Excerpt from Theatre Katanka's *The Obscene Madame D*. (2018)

LG: It was quite a stunning showing of the work in development. The audience was placed throughout the space, so it was a very immersive kind of experience to be part of that showing. The performer was Katia Molino, who's a very accomplished contemporary performance artist who has worked [for] over 20 or more years in the contemporary performance scene in Australia. It was a real tour de force of performance for her, and we picked this particular performance as a really lovely example, we thought, of Duška's notion of oral and aural dramaturgies because you have this wonderfully intense experience where the audience is all sitting in their own headphones but enjoying this very intimate connection to the performer who they see in front of them, weaving between them, sometimes in front of them, sometimes behind them. It's that paradoxical thing with headphones that despite the fact you're separated from a live performer in front of you, you are also very strongly connected to them. And while you lose that wonderful sense that you get in live theatre of your bodies being connected between the performers' voice and your ears, this kind of headphone theatre gives you a completely different experience of that shared intimacy with a performer. It was quite a magical performance, though I must say that the workshop performance where the audience was scattered amongst the set and the performer worked even better than when it went to a formal theatre setting where we were sat in two rows and the performer performed more conventionally in the middle of that space.

GMcA: Can I ask, so that recording was made in the Rex studio?

LG: Yes, it was.

GMcA: Fascinating gorgeous, lovely, lovely work. The audience are wearing headphones, their relation to the performer is changed, as Laura's just been saying, that there's this kind of intimate connection. What about their relation to the rest of the audience, what happens then, are they cut off from the rest of the audience in some way?

LG: I think that's a really interesting question, Gay, because for me, this sort of headphone theatre – and in this case, it's the audience, rather than the performer, who's wearing the headphones – is closer in many ways to radio drama, despite the fact we're there live with her, because we experience it in a very solitary kind of way. Although it has connections to live performance, in other ways it's much more akin to the experience of radio drama, I think, than live performance – in the way that in radio drama you as an individual are connected to the sound but not to any other audience, even though you might be sharing the airwaves with thousands of other people. I find that in a performance like that one, and particularly in the more conventional setting, I did feel quite disconnected from the other audience members and it was quite unsettling to not have that experience of being part of that body of people breathing together and experiencing together.



GMcA: Yes, that's interesting, isn't it.

Paul Dwyer: Yes, maybe something's lost but something's gained as well. I mean, I always think of our colleague Lowell Lewis, the anthropologist who talked about sound as, you know, of the senses. Sound is in some ways the most public and also the most intimate because obviously from a phenomenological point of view it literally gets into your body and resonates in your ear canal and so forth. So there's something, there is an enormous intimacy: I don't completely lose consciousness of the other audience members, I feel like I'm having an experience in parallel with them but it might not be the same experience. It reminds me of Brecht – one of his famous poems, he talks about when the actor speaks their words I think, the phrase goes something like: 'The actor speaks their words as if it was in an arrow going out into the audience.' And he says something like: 'I know that we are hearing the same thing, but we're not hearing it at the same time, or we're not perfectly in sync.' And I actually really enjoy that sense of phasing, being in phase and out of phase with a performer and with my fellow audience members but–

LG: I should say, I guess, that I'm a huge fan of radio drama, I love radio drama as a form and we've talked about this a little over the last few days, this fascinating thing that radio drama was such an incredibly important form in the early part of the 20th century. And then 20 years ago, 15 years ago it started waning in terms of the support that it got through our national broadcaster and so on. That happened at the same time as podcasting had just started and people started to experience this kind of aural and oral dramaturgy and communication in new ways. So I don't think it's a negative thing – I really treasure that extraordinary experience that you can get through radio drama and through a performance like Katia's in *The Obscene Madam D*.

GMcA: Can I ask now about the experience of the creative process and what you documented and what you recorded? So were you documenting Katia's creative process basically? Where were the students involved in this, where were the watchers, and what was happening with the sound, the creation of the sound? Did you record all that?

LG: This was a project that was supervised by our colleague Amanda Card so I wasn't in the room for the whole of the process. But yes, it was actually recorded: the students – following your excellent training, Gay – wrote a log book which documented what went on in the course of the rehearsal and the development process. And it was recorded, but I think that much of the development went on not in the dim lighting of the final workshop version. But the students were certainly an integral part of it, and were placed within the space during the course of the rehearsal process, so they weren't setting off not to be observed and not to interfere with the process, they were folded into it.

GMcA: So they were actually props?

LG: Yes they were!

PD: In a way they were!

GMcA: So the making of the sound, and the making of the video – were there issues involved for you in documenting all that? Were there complications? Because so much of that, making the sound tape–

PD: –it's happening on people's laptops and stuff.

GMcA: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PD: Yes, that happens and also the artists were able to use some of the facilities elsewhere on campus, on the campus of Sydney University – sound recording studios and so forth. But you touched on a really good point, Gay. I mean, I know we're going to go back and talk about the early development of rehearsal studies at Sydney Uni, but it is true that when you are trying to observe and document the process of artists who are exploring new technologies, and who are kind of working at, I guess, the kind of really complex interface of technologies that favour secondary orality – of which there's such a



proliferation now – and residual technologies that come to us from literacy, a text or documents or whatever, it becomes a bit harder. Because there are these moments where a lot of these contemporary performance companies, their rehearsal doesn't look like a conventional playscript-based rehearsal, you might have half a dozen people or more strewn across the space all working on their own laptops and so for students and observers of the rehearsal process, it can be a little bit tricky. You know, how much are you allowed to interact with that artist who seems to be doing something quite private, and isn't necessarily talking everything through in the way a playscript-based rehearsal tends to involve a lot of table work and then often a fairly structured move from the table work to the work on the floor and so forth. It's a moveable feast, in my experience. But I guess I would also come back to the thing that any kind of mode of rehearsal documentation and analysis that draws inspiration from ethnographic methods – the practical challenges of doing the fieldwork are actually telling you something about the nature of the process itself – so when we've had students, for example, who've wanted to do an ethnographically-inflected or an ethnographically-inspired study of, say, theatre design processes. Well most theatre designers working in independent theatre are doing the work in their bedrooms – the difficulty of getting access is telling you something about the precarious situation of those artists, which is an important part of the analysis of the field before you even get to, you know, the discussions of the showing of practice. But I wonder, Gay and Laura, if should we maybe wind back the clock a little bit and talk about how the department of Theatre & Performance Studies at Sydney embarked on this decades-long adventure now of kind of taking a quasi-ethnographic approach to studying the creative process?

GMcA: Yes, yes – storytelling, yes.

PD: I think you should start Gay, because when the department was – Laura and I are basically from the same vintage, we were undergraduate students with you and then post-graduate students with you, my sense was that certainly in the early '80s/mid-'80s, it was the high point of semiotic approaches to analysing live performance. And the rehearsal studies stuff was kind of working backwards from that to try and understand the process of semiosis–

GMcA: Yes, that's right.

PD: –and how decisions about blocking and staging of various sorts were made. And then it became its own beast. Can you elaborate a bit on that?

GMcA: Yes, sure. What happened was first of all because, when I was working in the French department – that's the other thing about Performance Studies at Sydney is that the people who set it up were all from different language departments, so Indonesian and Italian and French and English. So working with literature students, my intention was to demonstrate to them how meaning is made in the theatre, how the text functions in the theatre process, that the meaning that is made in the theatre is made with the text, it's not in the text. That's why I wanted to get actors to come to the university and rehearse in front of the students, so that they would see how this process, this creative process worked. That's how it began. And as you say, it was the heyday of semiotics so that our intention was to find ways of analysing performance, of dealing with performance instead of forever the performance being subordinated to the text and to literary study of the text. So that was the rationale. The reason we wanted actors – highly skilled professional actors, not the students doing it themselves in workshops, which was the way drama departments operated – [was] because I knew that we wouldn't get far enough with that. We needed to have real actors, really highly skilled actors who were going to mine the text and do the thing that actors do when they read and explore text. So when Performance Studies started, when we got the funding and we were able to start Performance Studies, we kept working with professional artists because we realised how extremely valuable this was. So we were doing various projects – at that stage, when we started, we were doing whole productions. We got the funding – don't



ask how, but we did! – to do whole productions. And then we realised that: a) that was too expensive, we couldn't get funding every year but we had students every year. So that was part of the reason for starting the documentation. So all these things were happening simultaneously – we were exploring performance analysis, documentation of performance and recording performance. So we had these full productions and we realised that was too much, that was – and that may spill over into what you're going to say about the issues that you're confronting now – but it was too much for the students, they couldn't afford the time, to spend six weeks watching, we couldn't afford the money, and also my experience was that it produced too much material for me to cope with in a year. That's another thing: the model that the Drama Departments, the Theatre Studies departments were working on was to continually produce more and more work. So every year they were producing plays with the students – the students would be doing workshops and making theatre. So they were becoming kind of pseudo practitioners in that they just were always on to the next thing, and never having the chance to think back and look over what had been done and deal with the material they produced. So that was where we were. And this was when the 'ethnographic turn' happened, I suppose, that we were finding we had masses of material that was coming in through this work, and the Theatre Studies colleagues were not at all interested in this work, I have to say! They were actually very critical of it. When I gave papers at theatre studies conferences, they said things like: 'But how boring to sit and watch for all that time, do you really mean you sit and watch, don't you want to be doing it yourself?', and I would say: 'No, not at all, and it's not boring!' Others said: 'Oh but that's parasitic on the actors.' For some reason, academics are supposed to miraculously have these insights themselves and not rely on the actors. And other people – because the other thing that was happening at this time was, of course, that huge divide between what now after Hans-Thies Lehmann, we would say 'dramatic theatre' and 'postdramatic theatre.' But at that time there was this huge polemic within the theatre community about dramatic theatre, text-based, character-based, narrative-based theatre, which was considered old hat and boring – and why, the other colleagues in Theatre Studies department were saying, why were we focusing on Corneille and Racine and Strindberg and Büchner (those were the productions that we had done) when we should have been working with them contemporary performance? As you know, we did a lot of that work as well. So this was where we were at: realising there was something hugely important that we were trying to grasp and not having the methods to do so, not knowing how to cope. And then – you've heard this story before, but our Indonesianist friend and colleague Tony Day had invited an anthropologist to come to the department, to a seminar to talk about her experience in Bali – she was doing an ethnographic study of faith healing, and had been going back to Bali.

PD: This was Linda Connor?

GMcA: Linda Connor, who's now the Professor of Anthropology at Sydney.

PD: That's right. And a good union member, by the way!

GMcA: [*Laughter.*] Oh, bless her. Well she was a lecturer at Newcastle University at the time. So she had been going back to Indonesia working with this faith healer and she had organised for an ethnographic filmmaker to come and film a session of a faith healing. So her paper was about the issues of documentation, because as I said we were really involved with documentation at the time: 'How do you document performance, how can you record performance, can you document the rehearsal process? How do you do it? Do you make a film, or do you write about it, do you write case books, or do you make films?' She was talking about the whole issue, the problems of conflict between – or this triangular relationship between herself the anthropologist, the faith healer (her 'host' as she called her), and the filmmaker. There were all sorts of issues there with the technology intervening in the faith healing process. And then she was talking about problems of her relationship with her host in the field, the fieldwork experience entering the field, she talked about the conflicts that she sensed when her host would only tell her what she thought was appropriate for her to know or other occasions



when the host would be telling her what the host thought she wanted to know, rather than what was really happening. She talked about all these issues that just resonated with me as: 'There it is, she gets it, she knows exactly that these are the issues that we're confronting all the time. How to gain access, how to relate.' So I realised that ethnography, and the experience of ethnographers in the field was where we were going to find the sort of guidance, the sort of conceptual framework, the sorts of methodologies perhaps that were going to help us to do this work, and that's where it all began. And the other thing that I learned from Linda Connor was about time, because [of] her experience, the anthropological, the ethnographic experience was this immersion in the field and then withdrawal from the field and then years of work on the material that's been gathered. So the editing of the film: she was saying the film wasn't going to be ready for years down the track! And then the use of the ethnographic film: how does it – is it standalone? Is it actually used in a context of some discussion, of some presentation by the anthropologist? Does it illustrate points, or is it in itself a complete record? That was also extremely important for us, for me. I thought: 'Those are the issues. So okay, we don't have to keep on producing more work, more work, more work. We actually have to give ourselves the time now to do a project and then work on it.' So that's how it happened, that's how it began.

PD: That's... I think the phrase that is popular in academia these days is 'slow scholarship'. And I think Laura and I, and I'm sure others listening, and Duška and co., would agree that it would be nice to be in institutions that supported, a little bit more, the idea of slow scholarship. Gay and Laura, if you don't mind, can I just be a bit cheeky here? Gay, I want to quote back to you something that you wrote in an article in 1996.

GMcA: Good lord!

PD: Because I'm thinking it might be worth thinking about, you know, what was learned once the department and researchers in the department had started to make this turn towards an ethnographic paradigm for analysing the creative process, what are some of the things that were learned. And you wrote in 1996 very beautifully, you said:

Theatre, as I have come more and more to appreciate, the more I observe the rehearsal process, is a profoundly oral practice and it needs to be explored within an oral paradigm.

[McAuley 1996: 144]

You wrote that with a kind of equal reference to text-based, playscript-based theatre and to more contemporary performance modes. I just wonder whether you want to elaborate a little bit on that? Because it strikes me as something still very true. I imagine, Laura, [in] teaching rehearsal studies you would have had many moments, those pindrop moments when you realise it doesn't matter if the words are written by some famous playwright and are fixed in stone, this is an oral practice. But look, yeah, maybe, first you, Gay, and then Laura, if you want to talk a little bit more about that?

GMcA: Well, our experience of course was that there was a lot of talk in rehearsal. It was always that everything was talked about. And so now what you're saying that might be happening now with technology is there is maybe less talk, the creator is sitting at the computer doing, and not talking it through.

PD: Differently structured talk, I think. For me anyway, but Laura might have some views about that.

GMcA: That was definitely the experience of practice. But in that article I think I'm talking about orality and literacy and that theatre, being the first artistic form that was written down, came out of an oral culture but the text was written. I think Aristotle put us on the wrong track from the very beginning by saying that what mattered was the written!

[Laughter.]

PD: But he wasn't observing rehearsals as much I don't think!



GMcA: Exactly, exactly! [*Laughter.*]

PD: And was about 150 years after the performance!

GMcA: So it seemed to me that the university as an institution, fair and square in the literate domain, was never going to be able to deal with theatre, which was an oral practice. And that there was always going to be this conflict, and what Theatre Studies departments were doing was kind of shifting themselves somehow into the oral domain by making performance and not writing about it, and theatre practitioners had been making performance but not theorising their work, or not until the rise of the director when directors did start writing. Now we've got through the 20th century, a whole literature of theorising the practice, beginning to theorise the practice. Until then, as we know from our experience in rehearsal, the actors – the knowledge, this craft knowledge is not written down, it's passed on orally in rehearsal – as Jim Sharman said in his brilliant aside in that Rex Cramphorn lecture, is passed on as gossip, right, as storytelling, as anecdotes and storytelling. That was one of the things that we did discover by sitting patiently in the rehearsal rooms, that we were able to see how this process of passing on knowledge happens in an oral practice. In that article, I also talk about theatre practice being at the interface of emergent and residual cultures and it did seem to me that that's something also really important about mainstream theatre practice. That article is also coming at the time of this dispute between the mainstream – as Schechner was dismissing it as boring, boring and bourgeois and dead – and the contemporary theatre practice, the experimental, the avant-garde. I was trying to say that what is valuable about our Western mainstream theatre culture, that we've had for 2000 years, is that it does always involve – in this derided text-based practice – an engagement between residual culture, the text, and emergent, the oral, the contemporary, the here and now. The residual has to be made anew in the present, and engage with the context of the present, and that's something extremely valuable that we were at risk of throwing overboard, it seemed.

PD: What about you, Laura? From teaching students a McAuley-esque, if I can put it that way, approach to rehearsal studies, what do you feel you've been learning yourself along the way about rehearsal and this kind of oral culture that exists, or residual oral culture or more a secondary oral culture that exists within rehearsal rooms?

LG: Look, I had made that note to myself about Gay commenting about the rehearsal being an oral practice. So it's something that I've certainly carried with me when I think about teaching rehearsal studies, indeed teaching dramaturgy as well, because I think that there are, for me, really strong connections in the way that I teach a course on dramaturgy to third-year students that emerged directly out of my experience of observing professional actors in rehearsal projects for rehearsal studies. I think you can't underestimate that. When I think about this idea of oral and aural dramaturgy, it takes me back to the very first national playwrights' conference I attended as a dramaturg. I had been given several plays to work on that were to be developed in this conference and I'd done my preparation. As you know, I came out of a literature department, so I'd done a lot of work with text-based theatre but as a text. I'd done all my preparation, I'd worked so hard to think about how we might develop these works. And then the second we sat down with actors and I started hearing those words coming out of the mouths of actors, I instantly started making connections that I had not seen while reading, and understanding how the play worked in ways that I could not possibly have understood just by reading. I think that that's something really powerful about sound and orality: it untethers you from that linearity of scripts and it's a real gift because that's what actors can give you in a rehearsal room too. They're that mediator between that written text and what it can actually mean. And that's something that I've taken on board when I teach dramaturgy. So the course as I teach it now is always based around a project where we invite in a director, a dramaturg, a writer and actors to work on a new piece, a new play or piece of performance. And the students are – even in that dramaturgy course – quasi-ethnographers, they're learning dramaturgical skills but what they're doing [is] they're sitting and



observing these professionals at work. Their assessment task is to start with the text before it went into a dramaturgical workshop, and at the end of that workshop tell me about the dramaturgy that went on, what does dramaturgy entail? And it's not just cutting and pasting a text, and it's not just the writer who does it, and it's not just the dramaturg either. It's often the actors who are the people who have the skills to develop that text into something that will become theatre.

PD: I'm really interested to hear you talk about that Laura, that there's that carry-over from teaching the ethnographic approach to rehearsal studies to the way that you think about dramaturgy. Certainly for me, when I wear that other hat that I wear a little bit beyond the walls of academia, when I've been making professional theatre, principally verbatim and documentary theatre. Normally, as the dramaturg/researcher type of person, occasionally as a performer, fairly reluctantly as a performer I must admit. I've been thinking about this Salon and reflecting on how much my practice as a theatre maker in that documentary area has been informed by the rehearsal ethnography work that Gay started. Partly I think it's because – and this is one of the things I really like about Duška's notion of oral/aural dramaturgies – is that it re-orientates the discussion of, say, verbatim theatre slightly away – not totally away from politics but it just comes at it from a different angle. Because I think, for me, when I've been making verbatim and documentary theatre work, it's never just been about, you know, 'in a world of political spin, we must speak truth to power'. It was always about attending to the texture of talk. And I think the more I got into reading about ethnographic research methods – or other qualitative research methods like conversation analysis or systemic functional linguistics or grounded theory or whatever, but particularly the ethnographers – I had that sense that verbatim theatre involves in a similar way a commitment to vernacular experience. I always had that sense that you have to attend to the texture of the talk as much as anything else. There's just as much information to be gleaned from the manner in which an interviewee is speaking to you, their pauses and hesitations and false starts and all of that, as there is from the ideation or content of their talk. So that is something that really appeals. But the other thing is some of the theatre works that I've made. So the *Bougainville Photoplay Project* based on the research I did up in Papua New Guinea, and *Beautiful One Day*, based on work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on Palm Island in the far north of Queensland – those were documentary theatre projects in which I was entering into cultures where there's really still a very strong residual orality. Huge. I think it was when I was in those cultures and I started thinking back about all of the curriculum materials that we share with our students in rehearsal studies that I suddenly went: 'Oh, now I understand what Clifford Geertz means when he's talking about thick description!' Or: 'Now I understand what Kirsten Hastrup means when she talks about the risks of symbolic violence! It's full on!' I think that all the ethnographic literature started to make a lot more sense for me – but also because I had some of that ethnographic methodology on board, it started to change the way I negotiated relationships with people in those cultural settings and went about making a piece of theatre. I guess what I wanted to say was that there's a difference for me of degree – I wouldn't say difference in kind, but I think there's a difference in degree – between doing observations of theatre practitioners in a rehearsal studio as a form of fieldwork and then working in the sorts of settings that anthropologists have traditionally, problematically, based themselves in.

GMcA: Oh, yes.

PD: I was saying to Laura earlier, for example, it's that sense that when you're in a place like Palm Island or the region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, there's no pause button. There's no – you can never get away from the rehearsal, you can never say: 'Okay, that's the end of today's rehearsal, I'll go home and have dinner.' It's just, you're constantly on.

GMcA: Yes.



PD: And there's a much greater ambiguity about the roles that people are playing. You know, it can take you months or even years to start to understand the family histories and the clan ties and the economic relationships between people which contribute to an individual's status. And I know that roles can be slippery in a theatre rehearsal room too, like for example the dramaturg – everyone can have a hand at dramaturgy, it's not just the person who is designated as the dramaturg. But I think it's even more intense in those kind of 'traditional' fieldwork settings.

GMcA: Absolutely.

PD: Also that difficulty in bracketing off what's going to turn out to be important in your research. So a whole morning spent talking with someone in Papua New Guinea about the process of smoking coconut shells and then bagging the stuff up to be processed as a copra cash crop, and you think: 'Well, what's this got to do with my ethnographic fieldwork research into reconciliation ceremonies?' But of course it has everything to do with it because it's about how people make the money that they need to stage a reconciliation ceremony. So I think that those are the sort of things that I would have been completely out of my depth [with] if I hadn't had some grounding in ethnography through the study of theatrical rehearsal processes. But it also led me to understand at a much deeper level the ethnographic methodology, I think. And it changed the way, for example, just making a piece of documentary theatre work with Aboriginal people – particularly obviously as a white, middle-class male – it's not just about finding stories, it's about making sure that you have the permission to tell those stories. For example, in the show *Beautiful One Day*, which I know Laura and you both saw, we were talking to the niece, sorry the granddaughter, of a very famous Aboriginal activist, Willie Thaiday. This woman Kylie was a performer in our show, Kylie Doomadgee. And we'd edited some – 'we' meaning of the whole creative team – we'd edited some bits of her grandfather's autobiography, a beautiful text where he's denouncing the colonial control of Aboriginal people's lives on Palm Island. And we said: 'Here you go, Kylie, this will make a great monologue for you, and it's your granddad after all.' And she's rehearsing it – and it's a text which I thought, this will sit perfectly with her, the text had a very oral style even though it had been written down, it had obviously been taken from speech. And she was rehearsing it and she came to me after a couple of hours and said: 'Paul I don't think I can do this.' And I thought it was just a performer confidence issue. And I said: 'Of course you can Kylie, you'll be fine! You know, you've got a great presence on stage, I'll help you learn your lines. Come on, let's have a look at it.' And it took me quite a while before I realised she had meant: 'I don't think I can do it. I certainly can't do it unless we go around and we talk with all of the aunties and uncles who have a living connection to my grandfather Willie Thaiday, because I don't know if I can stand on stage as a young woman and voice the words of my grandfather, who was a senior male elder in the community.' Thank god I had a smidgen of ethnographic fieldwork methodology. So I think that's kind of one of the unexpected spin-offs for me of the way in which we've set about studying theatre-makers' creative processes. It took me a while to realise it was informing the way I was going about making work beyond the academy.

GMcA: That's a very revealing story, and I'm delighted to hear that actually, because of course that was one of their major impacts, of our ethnographic turn, was to take us out of the laboratory, out of the studio, out of the Rex Cramphorn studio, and into the theatre. To actually try and engage with what was going on, on the practitioners' own terms even though that made it much harder because they didn't want us there often, and we had to coax and cajole to be permitted that degree of access. You can study all kinds of things in the laboratory – and I think a lot of the work that is very interesting work going on in Europe now where university academic groups are getting very interested in creative process, they're tending to do it in the laboratory, kind of dipping in: we've got a week, they're giving us a week of access to their work, and we'll watch for a week. And my experience is, again, this slow, slow, slow research where one week is not enough. You need to be there for the whole thing.



LG: Yes, that's so true! And it makes me envious of our honours students, actually, Gay. Because of course each year we still send our honours students out to do a full-length placement on some kind of theatre or performance-making process and we have had some really extraordinary pieces of work that have come out of that. A number of them from mainstream theatre companies, so I can think of a wonderful project that was at Belvoir St Theatre a couple of years ago, and we had two students last year, one attached to Griffin, on a new Australian work, one of Hillary Bell's plays, and another working on an STC show. But there are also those other marvellous projects where these students take the training that they've had in the Rex, in our laboratory, and then they apply it to somewhere completely unexpected. So we had an absolutely outstanding honours casebook last year which looked at roller derby training. And this particular student was both a participant and an observer so she trained with this team and then wrote about them, and it was fascinating. Another casebook recently was with a student who attended a music festival – you know, you camp out, take lots of drugs, get very dirty kind of music festival.

PD: No, not our students!

[*Laughter.*]

LG: No, no, because she was being an observer!

PD: No names, no pack drill!

LG: No, absolutely not! But absolutely fascinating that you can take this kind of training, and this kind of theory, and you can use it in all sorts of other situations where people are undergoing training or performing in some way.

GMcA: I wanted just to say something to Paul. I noticed Paul [that] you're saying, very correctly, that this is ethnographically-inflected work. And I think that's really important that we are not doing ethnography, we're doing performance studies.

PD: Yeah, it's a sliding scale.

GMcA: We are borrowing from ethnography and their practices and their experiences to help us do what we're trying to do, which is engage with the whole vast range of performance practices in the context of various societies. So it's true it's [a] sliding [scale] – I can see that your experience, Paul, on Palm Island could be seen as ethnography.

PD: Yes I think it's a sliding scale. But for our undergraduate students, they get a little window onto rehearsal if they do a fourth-year honours research project that becomes quite substantial and then some of the postgraduate students at PhD level are doing really – I mean, I don't have a problem saying they're doing an ethnographic study of X, Y or Z. You described the ethnographic turn that our department took, I guess, three decades ago, and it was kind of small steps and a lot of: 'Oh my gosh, are we becoming anthropologists now? Maybe a little bit, hopefully!' And now of course, everyone's jumping on the bandwagon. So there's all sorts of disciplines who are claiming that their research is ethnography, and sometimes they haven't paid their dues quite frankly. But by the same token, I would say it's a strength in our discipline that we do let students at an undergraduate level start to dip their toes into the waters of ethnography. For years in anthropology the discipline was probably held back because they still had the idea of the 'heroic fieldworker' and they wouldn't let their students go anywhere near actually doing ethnographic style research until they'd done an honours degree or – and, you know, you had to go – that was all left until you were a postgraduate student. You had to have done two years of fieldwork before you could even contemplate beginning to write your thesis. It's useful to start introducing students to ethnographic ways of researching much earlier, because it foregrounds all of these other important questions: questions of embodiment, or questions as Duška's asking, you know, to do with the rapidly changing technological environment in which performance is made. We



are in an era now, where – Walter Ong talked about ‘secondary orality’, and I think he had in mind, you know, the tape recorder [*laughter*] and there are so many technologies now that facilitate forms of secondary orality. Going right back to your original comments about performance, theatre being an oral paradigm or operating within an oral culture, any time you've got a rapid expansion of technologies that promote new forms of orality or aurality – and you've still got obviously that the strong literacy in our culture – you do get interesting things happening in performance out of that. I think Tim Fitzpatrick in another context, talking about commedia dell'arte, talked about [how] there's always a generative structural tension between cultural forms that come to us from the world of literacy and cultural forms that come to us through oral traditions – and performance is often operating with that structural tension.

GMcA: So maybe, Paul, now is the time to talk about some of the Australian practitioners?

PD: Yes. Well I agree with Laura that that show by Theatre Kantanka that we looked at the start is a fantastic example of what could be thought of as a work made within an oral/aural dramaturgical frame. The two practitioners, for those who may be listening, the two practitioners from Australia whose work I would really encourage people to look at, one is Roslyn Oades – just google her and she'll come up – she's a Melbourne based theatre-maker. She's a really sophisticated theatre-maker in the area of headphone verbatim practice, and what I love about her work is that she's often casting people with scant regard to age, gender, ethnicity, and so forth. Her performers always wear really big puffy headphones, not simple little earpieces, so there's no ambiguity that the person who is talking to you may not be the person who spoke those original words in interviews. There's a really strong Brechtian element in her work, and the performances are halfway between spirit possession and just a task-based performance aesthetic. I love her work. But the other artist who I would mention in connection with oral/aural dramaturgies is a woman by the name of Tamara Saulwick, who's also Melbourne-based. I think her partner is a composer actually, and she's always worked a lot with sound in her live performance work. About five years ago, or actually a decade ago, she made a work called *Pin Drop* that was very, very well received. It was almost like – she's always mixing old technologies and new technologies – *Pin Drop* was almost like a foley, sound studio thing. She had a microphone and a little table and all of these little objects with which you can make sounds, but she also had these recordings of interviews with people describing moments of fear and anxiety in their lives. Some of these stories were of course stories from women about the fear and stress that they live under, sometimes even in their own homes, you know, difficult situations. In the sound score the smallest little sounds were amplified, if she's tearing a piece of paper it's amplified in the space: ‘crrrrrrr’, this sort of thing. An extraordinary work. Then more recently this other work premiered in 2015, a work called *Endings* which was commissioned for the Sydney Festival in 2015 and has since toured to the UK, I think it was at the Brighton Festival, Dublin [Theatre] Festival and Vancouver, I think the PuSh international festival of the arts in Vancouver. And *Endings* – she describes it as ‘a meditation on cycles and the ending of things, using portable turntables, reel-to-reel tape players and live performance. *Endings* finds form for experiences both ordinary and extraordinary that cluster around death, dying and afterlife’ [Tamara Saulwick website]. So, she recorded about a dozen interviews and then she put those recordings onto old technologies like pressed records. Antique record players are placed all over the space and reel-to-reel tape machines with the tape running over meters. She's also performing live, and there's music and so forth. There's this fragility to the voice because there's people talking about not necessarily unhappy experiences towards the end of life, attending [to] someone who's working their way towards death, I suppose. But the fragility of it all is it reinforced by the use of the old technology. So by your leave, I might take control of the screen again and just play a little bit of the last – because she remade the work as a radio play, so bear in mind that it was made originally for a live performance, and I think [it] works best as a live performance – and she's still doing it as a live performance. But this is Tamara Saulwick's *Endings*, I think an exemplary work of oral/aural dramaturgy.



[00:53:56 to 00:56:28] Excerpt from Tamara Saulwick's *Endings* (2015)

PD: Listeners if they want to – and I encourage them to – can go to Tamara Saulwick's website and you can link through to ABC Radio National to hear the full radio version of that piece, a brilliant piece of work that, sadly, was produced on an ABC Radio programme that no longer exists. So to come back to what Laura was saying about the demise at an institutional level of some of the support structures for sound compositions – but artists are drawn to it in extraordinary, you know, just huge, active ways.

GMcA: That was a brilliant, brilliant piece, lovely. So can I just say to you both thank you for this conversation and I hope that it's going to be useful in terms of the project.

LG: Thank you Gay. Thank you, Paul.

PD: Thank you Gay. Thank you, Laura.

GMcA: Thank you all.

Transcription by Samantha McAtear

Clips Summary

[00:05:58 to 00:07:55] Theatre Katanka's *The Obscene Madame D.* (2018)

[00:53:56 to 00:56:28] Tamara Saulwick's *Endings* (2015)

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