CHASE THE FEELING

MAKING MEANING IN AN AUTISTIC THEATRE COMPANY
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AUGUST, 2015

Michael Allen
PRODUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the work of a theatre company made up entirely of people diagnosed with variations of Autism Spectrum disorder (ASD). It investigates their practice with respect to the social structures that define their identity, the craft and techniques of contemporary actors and the vehicle of theatre itself to wrangle self-determination and expression in ways that re-imagine their collective identity. In doing so, this research explores how theatre performance as a social phenomenon suspends the everyday social relationships people have and by doing so facilitates the reconfiguring of meaning by way of an embodied, social and corporeal experience. Finally the project speaks to ideas in anthropology about writing culture and so includes a play script and performance. This creative analysis of the research seeks then to find a tangible path linking the rigor of creative practice, academic research and writing culture.

Fieldwork was conducted with the COMPANY @ which operates in Adelaide, South Australia. This analysis is presented in the form of exegesis, playscript and performance. The performance of the script took place on August 28, 2015 at the Bakehouse Theatre, Adelaide. The performance itself is sixty minutes in duration and rehearsals were conducted over two months with the cast, which consisted of participants from the fieldwork and a guest actor. Rehearsals were conducted over five hours per week for ten weeks, totaling approximately seventy hours rehearsal.

The writing of a play script and the subsequent interpretation of this script into a live performance are devices intended to speak to the authority of writing culture with respect to ethnography. This is used to delineate the process by which anthropological study contributes to the writing of culture and literature. The thesis is an ethnographic analysis and argues that writing observations of participants in fieldwork is in some respects a definition of cultural practice. The script and its performance seek then to broaden this analysis and allow a more fluid and interpretive construction of culture based on the readers/audiences contribution to experiential analysis. In this sense the research engages anthropological analysis and theory with the practice of interpretation on behalf of the reader. Given that members of the fieldwork acted the performance this gives autonomy to the participants of research and ownership of (re)creating their identity. The act of perceptive interpretation by the audience and subsequent feedback to performers creates a hermeneutic circle of expression and construction of identity, keeping the work alive and dynamic rather than fixed. In this sense the final analysis seeks to create a dynamic lived interpretation of cultural practice and contribute to arguments about dynamic anthropology and writing culture.

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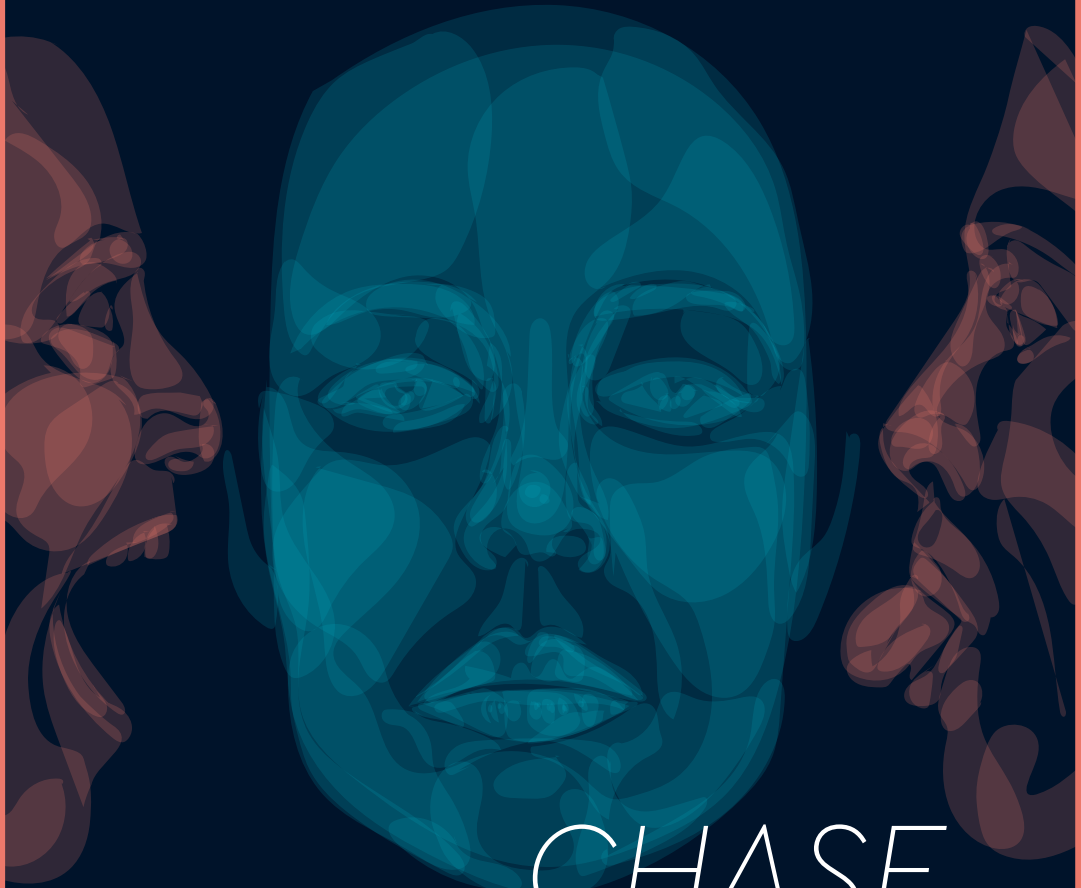
Michael James Allen
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All these people are awesome and need to be thanked. They are in no particular order.

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SCENE 1

A 'white noise' of people as, as in a mall, gradually becomes louder over the murmur of the audience. As it becomes louder individual phrases and comments from different people (interviews, news readers, part conversations etc) can be heard more audibly as they rise to the surface in the wash of sound and retreat again.

Its autism, not bad parenting
Nothing about us without us, nothing about us without us
...The autism epidemic...
he falls to the floor, kicking and screaming, it's just his way of coping
If I were president I would push for proper vaccinations but would not allow one-time massive shots that a small child cannot take
...I'm a good driver, definitely a good driver...
I just don't understand what the point of all this knowledge is
I won't change the way my child sees the world because he helps me see it clearer and that's a joy in itself
...yeah I just saw your photo, you look so autistic. I don't need no special kids following me...
...the increasing use of autism as an insult...

The houselights have dimmed to Blackout.

The volume builds and becomes almost too loud when suddenly the sound stops.

SCENE 2

In the darkness the voice, as of a director, guides the imagery. By the end of the speech the lights have come up on a lone figure on stage who is stimming.

THE DIRECTOR

Stand in a neutral position. Run your minds eye through your body. Where are you holding tension? Start from the feet. Are your toes relaxed? Check your legs, are your knees locked? Now move your mind's eye up through your pelvis and stomach. Be sure that you are breathing down into your stomach. Is your chest tight? Are your shoulders relaxed. Run your thoughts through your hands and fingers. Really investigate in detail how your body is in space. Your neck and face. Relax your jaw and breath through your mouth. And just be in that moment for awhile. Now when you are ready, open your eyes, look at your audience, start to speak the thoughts that come to you.

                                   TAHLIA

...

                                THE DIRECTOR

Tahlia? Are you with us?

                                   TAHLIA

Yes.

                                THE DIRECTOR

And what do you want to say?

                                There is a flicker in the lights

                                   TAHLIA

I don't know.

                                THE DIRECTOR

Try the first word or words, that come to mind when I say... hug

                                   TAHLIA

...

                                THE DIRECTOR

Anger

                                   TAHLIA

...

                                THE DIRECTOR

Anxious

                                   TAHLIA

...

                                THE DIRECTOR

You can make movement if you prefer. Just let the colours and sounds and meanings of the word react in you somehow and blurt them out. Don't think about it, just respond... fear.

                                   TAHLIA

...

                                THE DIRECTOR

OK. So you're struggling with the abstract, open endedness of that so lets try something, something a little bit more in context. Now remember, just listen and respond as you feel the ideas. Try the things suggested and play with the imagery. So, you're at a cocktail party. You arrive home, exhausted and a little tipsy from the complimentary drinks. But you can relax now, no more need to perform for others, you are, as it were, in your own 'backstage' space. While brushing your teeth, you

recall the wink that young man gave you from across the room. Well, did he give it to you or was it a twitch? Was it dust in his eye? And if he did give it to you, was it a flirt or a shared moment between two people who understand the tedium of the event? Now, practice trying to mimic the wink as you remember it, seeing if any of the different deliveries hold the key to the author's true intention behind the gesture. So, what are you doing now? Performing? For yourself or for others? Which wink are you giving and to who?

                    TAHLIA
I don't understand. Which question do you want me to answer?

                    THE DIRECTOR
Any of them. All of them.

                    TAHLIA
Well it's a bit difficult, for starters I don't drink.

                    THE DIRECTOR
OK. Well how does the room feel then?

                    TAHLIA
What?

                    THE DIRECTOR
Well is it a warm room or a cold room? Are people friendly or are they looking at you sideways wondering who you are?

                    TAHLIA
What does it matter if the room is warm or cold? And there are probably plenty of people there that I don't know just as much as they don't know me.

                    THE DIRECTOR
And how does that make you feel?

                    TAHLIA
Well, a little awkward I suppose.

                    THE DIRECTOR
And what does awkward feel like? Where does it live in your body? What colour is it?

                    TAHLIA
I don't know? Why does it matter?

                    THE DIRECTOR
It's just a way to try and re-imagine your feelings and emotions. OK lets try it a different way. Let's try to physicalise it.

                    TAHLIA

Oh, do we have to?

THE DIRECTOR

I guess not, if you're not comfortable with that. Let's stick with the cocktail party for the moment. Why are you there?

TAHLIA

Because you told me that's where I was.

THE DIRECTOR

Are you struggling with that imagery?

TAHLIA

Well, I don't go to cocktail parties. I don't really know what happens at them.

THE DIRECTOR

Well, let's try somewhere that's more familiar for you, a conference? A seminar?

TAHLIA

Well I do often speak at conferences.

THE DIRECTOR

Great, let's work with that. So, just getting back to that neutral place, relax your body, let go of all the tension. Relax your jaw and breath freely and deeply into your belly. Imagine and really see the space you are in, and the surroundings; the lights, is it bright or dim? The configuration of seats, are they in front of you or around you? The lectern, the microphone. Is there a screen? Are you in front of it or to the side? Really visualise the details of your surroundings. Are you nervous, are you confident. Now, when you are ready, in your own time begin to engage with your visualisation.

IMAGE 1: *'Tahlia' engages with 'the director'*

SCENE 3

TAHLIA

Your worship the vice chancellor, the honorable minister for the arts and education, esteemed heads of the universities respected academic departments, family, friends, interested lay folk and onlooking staff. I would like to start by acknowledging the Kaurna people and all traditional holders of the land we meet on. Hello and welcome to this evening's performance. This is a presentation of field work conducted as part of a Masters of Philosophy degree in cultural anthropology. Specifically this lecture considers the anthropology of theatre with the research involving what is considered to be the only autistic theatre company in the world. Any good research is, in part, a journey of discovery, so it is with the sharing of that knowledge, that journey. The presentation of that research story, echoes the same journey in the audience as of the story teller via a performance, a lecture, a service. One begins in ignorance of the experiences to come and how they will shape you. At the end you can consciously reflect on thoughts and feelings perceived and processed intuitively during the performance. This presentation of data is thus presented in a form that is indicative of the participants researched, the form of their activity and the expression of theoretical concepts rooted in the idea of performance. As an audience, your experience and subsequent reflection of a show such as this can only be understood via the cultural lens with which you perceive the world around you. In short, you can only understand or not understand an event based on the limits of your own life experiences or those closely imagined to it. We do this by assessing the various interactions against social norms and exchanges with others, morals, virtues and vices etc. Theatre is a unique social phenomena in human interaction. It is a moment in time and space where many people share an individual experience that suspends everyday social relationships and meanings, where suspension of disbelief is a benchmark of success.

ACTOR 1

(from the audience)

Blerrgh!

ACTOR 2

(from the audience)

Shhh!

TAHLIA

Once the performance is over regular rules of social exchange are once again the norm. Anthropologists have tried to understand and explain the everyday ways we interact with each other using this paradigm of theatre. One such idea borrows the terms 'front' and 'back stage'. This is a relatively easy idea to grasp. An 'actor' puts on a mask and 'becomes' another character by impersonating the behaviors and physicality of

another. Once the performance is finished, the actors remove the masks and are 'neutral' once again. An example of this is in the work place. A young lady working as a waitress must behave and 'act' in the appropriate way as befits her role. Until such time as she is not getting paid for the role anymore and 'knocks off'...

ACTOR 1
I thought we were coming to see a show.

ACTOR 2
Shhh!

ACTOR 1
I said I thought we were here to see a show not hear a lecture

ACTOR 2
This is the performance.

ACTOR 1
But it's just talking. Ah this is crap. What a rip-off.

ACTOR 2
Excuse me sir, but we are trying to watch the show.

ACTOR 1
Show?! That's rich. This isn't theatre. Theatre is plays, lines, actors in scenes.

Blackout

SCENE 4

The Directors voice from the darkness

THE DIRECTOR
OK stop there Tahlia, thank you. How did you feel that went?

Spotlight up on Tahlia

TAHLIA
Fine I guess. I thought the audience were a bit rude though.

THE DIRECTOR
What audience?

TAHLIA
The audience, just there.

THE DIRECTOR

That's good Tahlia, you're using your imagination. Now lets see if we can get some structure in there. That was good but a little bland. By that I mean it was just you talking, relaying information. Now, there's no value judgments here but acting is about achieving something, overcoming an obstacle to get what you want. Like, I'm trying to get you to understand what I am talking about. Your ignorance is my obstacle and I am using different methods to get or to make you understand. So lets ask ourselves some more questions. Who are you?

TAHLIA

I'm Tahlia.

THE DIRECTOR

Yes, I know that but who are you in this scenario that we are imagining?

TAHLIA

I'm the speaker at a conference I guess.

THE DIRECTOR

Yes, but let's get specific, what's your name?

TAHLIA

Tahlia

THE DIRECTOR

No, I mean if this was a character what's their name? Separate yourself from the identity of this speaker. Susan? Claire? Give them a name.

TAHLIA

But why, how does that help?

THE DIRECTOR

OK, OK. Let's just try something else then. What do they want? I mean why are they here giving this lecture?

TAHLIA

Because that's what speakers do at conferences.

THE DIRECTOR

Yes, but we need to make this a bit more dynamic. We need to give them a back story. Who are they, where have they come from, what do they want and how do they get it? So is this person a respected speaker or a first timer, trying to prove themselves. Is this an important seminar? Are they trying to impress someone in particular to get employment? Do they respect their audience or despise them?

TAHLIA

I don't know.

THE DIRECTOR

There are no right or wrong answers here Tahlia.

                              TAHLIA
Then why won't you accept my answers?

                              THE DIRECTOR
You can make up any scenario you like. But we do need to give them
some action. I mean what do they want; to make or to get... what?

                              TAHLIA
Well, they're just getting the audience to understand what she is
explaining. She is the speaker so they should be listening to her.

                              THE DIRECTOR
Excellent, you are starting to identify her as an 'other'. register that as a
feeling, a colour a smell. So, they should be listening to her but let's say
they aren't. That's your obstacle. The thing you have to overcome in
order to get your message across, now how do you do that?

                              TAHLIA
By talking to them.

                              THE DIRECTOR
OK, I think we need to take a break for a bit. I tell you what, maybe you
can go home and start to write some stuff down. Just let your
imagination run free. Explore those key questions, who am i; where
have I come from; where am I going; what do I want; how do I get it? If
it's too hard to separate yourself from the character, write two
characters, as if you are overhearing their conversation. Just write,
without filtering or editing. We can do that later as we explore the work
on stage.

                              TAHLIA
Do I have to?

                              THE DIRECTOR
Yes, Tahlia you do.

        SCENE 5

                              Tahlia sits at a desk. She
                              procrastinates, fidgets, stims and spins
                              around on the office chair

                              ACTOR 1

                  (from the audience)
What's going on?

ACTOR 2

(from somewhere else amongst the audience)
She's having another go.

ACTOR 1

Again?

ACTOR 2

Well he's gonna be expecting something next time. And he won't accept another superhero movie idea.

ACTOR 1

Are we still trying to 'smell colours of our aura'?

ACTOR 2

Apparently

ACTOR 1

Do we get a biscuit if we get it right?

ACTOR 2

Why?

ACTOR 1

You know why. Because we're...

ACTOR 2

Don't say it.

ACTOR 1

Why not? It's true.

ACTOR 2

If you say it though we will always be tied to it. If we refuse to acknowledge it then they don't own us.

ACTOR 1

You are so having sex with a bimbo

ACTOR 2

What?

ACTOR 1

You're fucking stupid.

ACTOR 2

...!

ACTOR 1

We are cursed, we are retards, we are shame, an embarrassment and an effort. We are autistic! And we are defined by that word and the meanings other people make for it.

ACTOR 2
Which is why we are going to do this. We are going to find a way, come hell or high water, to take that power for ourselves. We are going to say the way we see the world and we are going to get them to accept that. We define who we are not them.

Suddenly Tahlia starts typing furiously on the computer

ACTOR 1
Hold on there Che Guevara, I think you got her going...

ACTOR 2
Oh thank god. I didn't think we were gonna get her started at all for a minute there.

TAHLIA

(speaking as she types)
Scene one. Blackout. A spotlight up on a lone actor standing centre stage.

Actor 1 gets up from the audience and moves onto the stage

ACTOR 1
Original start.

ACTOR 2
You're doing it then are you?

ACTOR 1
Looks like it.

Tahlia is busily typing. As Actor 1 gets to the centre of the stage he takes a moment to prepare himself. Then assuming a more formal posture for an unseen audience...

ACTOR 1
Good evening. And welcome to this performance... this presentation... this performance presentation... This show...

(Pause)
Dada da da da da...

(Tahlia procrastinates)

ACTOR 2

Of for fucks sake hurry up

ACTOR 1

(to Actor 1)
Give her a break

ACTOR 2

Well this is supposed to be a play isn't it. Everyone's coming to watch a comedy

ACTOR 1

Not necessarily

ACTOR 2

A drama then, some kind of theatrical entertainment

ACTOR 1

Yes, I suppose

ACTOR 2

Well then we need a story. Drama, conflict, crisis. We need a journey. God people have been doing this for years. Surely there is a framework to do it. Just follow the instructions.

(They wait for Tahlia to start typing)

ACTOR 2

(moving from the audience to the stage)
Well I can't be arsed waiting. I don't know about the rest of you

ACTOR 1

Well what else are we going to do?

ACTOR 2

Well, we're the actors aren't we? We could just knock off early and go to the pub.

ACTOR 1

Look, we managed to jump start her, let's give her some gas.

(he scrunches up some paper he has pulled from his pocket and lobs it at Actor 2)
What's the first thing you need for a play?

ACTOR 2

A script.

                    (Actor 2 catches the paper and throws the
                     scrunched up paper at Tahlia. She does not react
                     or respond)

                              ACTOR 1
Well that's not happening anytime soon obviously. What else?

                     (Actor 1 pulls out another piece of paper, scrunches
                     it up and lobs it to Actor 2)

                              ACTOR 2
A stage

                     (Actor 2 catches again and throws it at Tahlia,
                     Again she does not respond)

                            ACTOR 1
Right well we have one of them. What else?

                     (as before)

                            ACTOR 2
An audience?

                     (as before)

                          ACTOR 1
Not yet though surely. We haven't even got a story.

                          ACTOR 2
But if there's no one watching what's the point?

                          ACTOR 1
We just perform for ourselves...

                          ACTOR 2
Isn't that just wanking?

                          ACTOR 1
Oh ha ha

                          ACTOR 2
I think that's another department.

                          ACTOR 1
All right

                          ACTOR 2
Oh god I hope she doesn't do that for "creative inspiration"

                          ACTOR 1

Oh please. She can't stand to be hugged, I cant see her slipping the digit.
Now keep focussed and we won't have to worry.

                              ACTOR 2
All right. Well we can use this as a stage, isn't there meant to be curtains
and seating and ushers and bar facilities and programs?

                              ACTOR 1
Why?

                              ACTOR 2
Well that's what going to the theatre is all about isn't it?

                              ACTOR 1
And dressing up like your going to church

                              ACTOR 2
And being seen to be seen by the people who are seen to be seeing

                              ACTOR 1
But remember that guy who said all you need is an empty space some
one to fill it and some one to watch? Here's the space, you fill it and
we'll watch.

                              ACTOR 2
And what do you suggest I fill it with?

                         (Tahlia is typing. Actor 1 stands bolt upright
                           suddenly)

                              ACTOR 1
Arsehole

                              ACTOR 2
I beg your pardon.

                              ACTOR 1
Arsehole!

                              ACTOR 2

                         (now also stands bolt upright)
Arsehole!

                         (the two actors engage in a version of 'the topping
                           game'. The scene escalates including physical
                           gestures. Finally one of the. Actors submits and
                           looks offended. Tahlia has stopped typing)

                              ACTOR 2
I'm sorry. You know I was only joking.

ACTOR 1

Ha. Fooled you. I was acting it.

Blackout

SCENE 6

A voice in the darkness

THE DIRECTOR

Stop there. That's great. You've written some great material and got some real tension going on there, conflict.

Spot light up on Tahlia standing alone on stage.

TAHLIA

I guess. They're just yelling at each other.

THE DIRECTOR

Yes exactly. So how can we make it more like life. People don't just stand there yelling at each other do they? Tension can be non-verbal cant it? That's usually expressed physically. So we need to create that physical tension. So lets imagine what that tension feels like. What colour is it?

TAHLIA

...

THE DIRECTOR

OK lets try it another way. I'm going to give you a series of images or sensations and I want you to physaclise them in a non-linear form. Its a simple exercise in expressing or interpreting the meanings or feelings of those words. Do you think you could give that a go?

TAHLIA

Sure.

THE DIRECTOR

OK so let's start with rage. Just physacilse with your body how rage feels.

Tahlia stands still. The two actors step forward and physicalise these words in bizarre and convoluted arrangements

THE DIRECTOR

OK, how about happiness.

>   Tahlia stands still. The two actors
>   physicalise.
>
>   THE DIRECTOR

Fear.

>   Tahlia stands still. The two actors
>   physicalise.
>
>   THE DIRECTOR

Seduction.

>   Tahlia stands still. The two actors
>   physicalise.

THE DIRECTOR
Tahlia, if you're not going to get involved then I can't help you. I need you to recall feelings from your life. It's called emotional recall. Remember a time when you felt warm, loved, embraced and see if you can recreate that physical and emotional state of being.

TAHLIA
But I am expressing it.

THE DIRECTOR
Well, I'm not seeing it Tahlia.

TAHLIA
I'm expressing it on the inside.

THE DIRECTOR
Well, at least you're starting to sound like an actor.

TAHLIA
Those feelings are just abstract concepts that are understood in social contexts. The social contexts change and therefore the representation changes. So my seemingly vacant expressions are in context to this seemingly vacant exercise.

THE DIRECTOR
I see.

TAHLIA
You don't recognise the response so you say I am not responding.

THE DIRECTOR
Yes, but you're not responding in a way that is communicating. This is why we are here.

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TAHLIA
Seems to me that you have the problem with interpreting, not me. What
have you learned about communicating and expressing yourself so that I
can understand you?

                        THE DIRECTOR
All right. I'm hearing you. But we are here to develop your abilities, to
respond in ways that are understandable in the context of our
community. Its like the language of society.   We're teaching you that
language so that you can more easily communicate with people in your
everyday life.

                        TAHLIA
But what if I don't want to learn your language?

                        THE DIRECTOR
I'm sorry

                        TAHLIA
Why can't you learn my language? Why can't you change for me?

                        THE DIRECTOR
Because you have the problem.

                        TAHLIA
...

                        THE DIRECTOR
I'm sorry, not a problem that was inappropriate. You have a condition,
you struggle. Anyway, that's not why we're here.

                        TAHLIA
So why are we here?

                        THE DIRECTOR
Because acting, performing, these are not just great fun... but also really
helpful in understanding social situations and non-verbal language,
manners and empathy. There is a great deal of research that shows...

                        TAHLIA
I don't want to hear about anymore research. I am a person not a social
petri dish.

                        THE DIRECTOR
We have a schism in communication. We are here to develop the subtle,
non-verbal language that happens in social settings around you. So you
don't feel isolated, so that you can engage with people, work, find
employment, have a life and most of all, express yourself clearly.

                        TAHLIA

> (she gives him the finger)

Fuck you. Is that clear enough?

THE DIRECTOR

OK, lets take a break then shall we? Why don't you continue with your creative writing exercise? Write what you think and feel about this exchange and lets see where that gets us.

TAHLIA

But I don't want to, I want to keep discussing this, this 'relationship'

THE DIRECTOR

Its not a democracy here Tahlia. I have to leave now anyway. I have to consult with some colleagues before we continue. I'll be back soon. In the meantime, continue with your creative writing exercise.

> The sound of a door closing. Tahlia looks bewildered.

TAHLIA

But who will I talk with if no one will listen?

IMAGE 2: *Actors 1 & 2 show us 'seduction'*

SCENE 7

> Tahlia is being interviewed on a
> nightly talk show with Actor 1 as self-
> centred and smug TV host. They are
> dressed in almost pantomime-like drag
> costume.

ACTOR 1

Look this is all very interesting but its not very dramatic is it?

TAHLIA

I'm sorry?

ACTOR 1

Well I mean as a dramatic, poetic piece of theatre this format has kind of been explored within the first five minutes. Its as interesting as community television.

> Canned laughter

TAHLIA

Come on.

ACTOR 1

Well, I can see how its very didactic, of course you are writing this for a thesis aren't you? So I suppose its got to have a lot of information. But where's the poetry? But where's the imagery? Autistics see things in imagery don't they?

TAHLIA

Now hang on a minute, if you could just let me answer...

ACTOR 1

I mean you haven't really addressed the core questions have you? Who is the lead character? What do they want? How do they get it? What changes them?

TAHLIA

Well I guess its a meant to be a bit existential. You know contemplating the meaning of theatre while being a part of the theatrical experience

ACTOR 1

Yawn!

> Canned laughter

TAHLIA

Well it worked for Beckett.

ACTOR 1
Don't you dare...

                    TAHLIA
When he made Vladimir and Estragon he...

                    ACTOR 1
I said, don't go there sister.

                    Canned booing

                    TAHLIA
Seinfeld?

                    ACTOR 1
Oh my God you went there. Do you even hear yourself girlfriend...

                    Canned laughter

                    TAHLIA
Now wait a minute...

                    ACTOR 1
So this new play, starring Meryl Rush and Geoffrey Streep, opens at
The Paladium, this week. How are sales going?

                    TAHLIA
Well...

                    ACTOR 1
Yeah look, I don't really care. Besides, I think from this interview we
can get the idea.

                    Canned laughter

                    ACTOR 1
I mean you don't even give the characters names.

                    TAHLIA
Why do they need names?

                    ACTOR 1
Now you're just being silly.

                    TAHLIA
No seriously, why do they need names. What does it matter ? They're
just not that important.

                    ACTOR 1

            (chokes in almost paralysed shock at this)

TAHLIA

Ok, I'll call the characters Mohammed and Scott. Happy?

ACTOR 1

See, that works, now we know something. Outcast asylum seeker versus right wing zealot. A clash of culture, status and politics. The nature of justice and human rights.

(aside to the audience)

Yeah that sounds much more interesting.

Canned laughter

TAHLIA

But don't you see, that's my point, as soon as you assign an identity, any identity you immediately stifle any chance of being listened to...

ACTOR 1

So, catch 'Chase the Feeling' opening this week at the Paladium. A political comedy, a sweeping story of humanity and human rights, an experimental dance piece, an artistic wank, a work o'faar...

(the last, word-spoken as if it were a brogue pronunciation of 'work of art', is drowned out by the sound effect of a fart)

Blackout. The sound of white nose and static

IMAGE 3: *Mark Hamill as 'a parent' in scene 8*

SCENE 8

Lights up

Another room. A conference between the Director, Tahlia's MUM/DAD, a Social Worker and Tahlia. The Social Worker is constantly taking notes. Tahlia sits to one side in her own world, watching but not engaging nor being invited to.

Actor 1 wears a sign around their neck which reads 'Social Worker'

Actor 2 wears a sign around their neck which reads either 'MUM/DAD' or 'Dad'

THE DIRECTOR

Well, that sounds like a very interesting scenario there Tahlia. I look forward to seeing what we can make of it in rehearsal.

Tahlia blows a raspberry at the unseen Director, mimicking the fart from the previous scene.

THE DIRECTOR

(to MUM/DAD)
She certainly has a fiery imagination.

SOCIAL WORKER

We should probably move onto the reason we have called you.

THE DIRECTOR

Yes, well, we are definitely making progress but she is stubborn. She still struggles to engage emotionally with the work and express it at that deep emotional level required and is determined to question everything instead of just going with the flow.

MUM/DAD

Well, that's a good thing isn't it? It shows she has a questioning mind.

THE DIRECTOR

Well, yes but these sessions are to get her to embody non-verbal social language such that she can converse intuitively. As you know these are valuable skills to becoming a fully integrated person and finding coping mechanisms in social surroundings.

SOCIAL WORKER
Look, we think despite her obvious challenges Tahlia is a real star.

                    (She offers Tahlia and her MUM/DAD a
                        chocolate)
And we have been happy to offer these drama sessions for you as a
client but we have to now consider where we are going and how we can
best use the resources we offer.

                    MUM/DAD
I don' t understand.

                    SOCIAL WORKER
Well we only have a finite amount of funding that we can dedicate to
any individual and we need to assess how we can most effectively
allocate that money.

                    MUM/DAD
But we have been coming here since she was diagnosed. You diagnosed
her.

                    SOCIAL WORKER
Well we don't like to call it diagnosis. We simply identify behavior
indicators relative to a spectrum of disorders.

                    MUM/DAD
You know what I mean.

                    SOCIAL WORKER
Yes, I know and I'd like to think that you and Tahlia have become a
valuable part of our community. Your family has been very active in our
programs and networks. But she is coming to the end of the support we
offer. We have many younger clients that need our support.

                    MUM/DAD
Are you saying she's cured, that I don't have to worry about autism
anymore

                    SOCIAL WORKER
No I'm not saying that.

                    MUM/DAD
Of course you're not because that wouldn't be true.

                    SOCIAL WORKER
I'm sorry I don't think I understand.

                    MUM/DAD
So what are you saying? Because she's 18 you're cutting her loose? If it's
not cause she's cured then why would you do that?

SOCIAL WORKER
Well you see at 18 years old we find most of our clients have developed
enough skills to be able to operate independently in the community.

                         MUM/DAD
So she's cured.

                         SOCIAL WORKER
No

                         MUM/DAD
Then I'm afraid I don't understand. These are her friends. Are you
saying she cant be a part of the group anymore?

                         SOCIAL WORKER
Well, our funding is limited to specific programs that are determined by
the government so in a way our hands are tied. These workshops were
designed to help clients social behaviour and, although very helpful, and
fun in lots of ways too I imagine - is that right Tahlia? Did you have fun
at your drama classes? - this work is outside of the funding criteria,
especially as she is nearly an adult.

                         THE DIRECTOR
Yes, and this is where I get caught up in the whole thing I'm afraid as
the funding for my workshop group has come to its end.

                         SOCIAL WORKER
And we really value your work too. You do some wonderful work with
the group. I'm always amazed they can remember all those words, well,
not really I suppose...

                         MUM/DAD

                    (ignoring the Director)
I'm sorry you've lost me. Are you abandoning the whole group or just
her.

                         SOCIAL WORKER
Well if I can explain. You see the government makes available limited
funding for disability services. But they also have strict criteria about
what those services can be. We here at Autism Respect Services, or A.
R. S. as we like to call it, submit an application for a program of
services which fulfil this criteria and are awarded funding based on that.

                         MUM/DAD
So the government gives you money to run services based on a program
that the government sets.

                         SOCIAL WORKER
Well it's not as simple as that but essentially you are right.

MUM/DAD
And part of those services is the diagnosis of people on the spectrum.

                        SOCIAL WORKER
Yes

                          MUM/DAD
So you get money from the government to diagnose people and then
provide services for them

                        SOCIAL WORKER
Yes

                          MUM/DAD
You're on sweet deal then aren't you

                        SOCIAL WORKER
I'm sorry

                          MUM/DAD
But your also the leading advocacy organisation which sets the agenda
and determines the what is a disability in the first place, right?

                        SOCIAL WORKER
Well, no, diagnosis is determined by the medical experts. But yes we are
the leading advocacy network in the state. We speak for them.

                          MUM/DAD
So why cant you apply some of that money to the work these guys do in
their theatre group. I mean it would be great publicity for the
organisation. A small tight-nit group of people who support each other.
Their stories would be great publicity and let them speak for themselves.

                        SOCIAL WORKER
Well it's not as simple as that. You see like I say our program is limited
based on what the government determines and most of that money is
dedicated to therapy and medical research. To be honest this was a bit of
a fluke to get this group started in the first place, let alone go on for so
long.

                          MUM/DAD
Well can they get their own money? Surely there are arts grants for
disabled people, if that's what you are saying they are.

                        SOCIAL WORKER
Yes but it's very competitive as there is only a limited amount of money
across all the disabled services sector.

                          MUM/DAD
So your competing against intellectual disability and physical disability
as well.

SOCIAL WORKER

Yes, its a bit cannibalistic I agree. And unfortunately there isn't money set aside for me to dedicate any support for grant writing on their behalf.

MUM/DAD

Well, what if they applied for it on their own.

SOCIAL WORKER

Well you see if they apply under our name they would have to submit a proposal for the grant to our board that we would need to approve, just to make sure its within our charter of funding you see? If the board says yes, then certainly they can apply for an arts grant.

MUM/DAD

So they have to apply to A.R.S. for permission to apply for a grant.

SOCIAL WORKER

Yes

MUM/DAD

Then, if you say they can, they have to do all the work to apply for the grant which you won't help them write because you don't get paid for it. And then they get to compete against all the other disabled groups for a few thousand measly dollars. Do you know how much work that is and how long it would take to get one small project up?

SOCIAL WORKER

Hmmm. I can imagine.

MUM/DAD

This is bullshit. So much for advocacy support and encouraging autistic people to speak for themselves when you hold all the cards.

SOCIAL WORKER

I understand your frustration, I really do. But my job is to manage programs that support as many people as possible.

MUM/DAD

A job that's paid for out of all this funding you get. What about the quality of support? So, they're only a small group but look at them, look at Tahlia. It's her home, they're her friends. Make the group bigger if its about supporting more people.

SOCIAL WORKER

Well, it's not that much funding, I'm only on a small wage.

MUM/DAD

You're not even listening. Lets get back to Tahlia. Now, you diagnosed her seven years ago. You gave her a seventy out of a possible one hundred point assessment. Now, you know how that has affected her. She cant get disability pension from social services, she cant get a

disability access plan from her university, she gets no other support
services apart from what you offer. And now you're cutting her loose
because she's turned eighteen and you can't be bothered supporting the
one good thing she gets out of it all. Suddenly she's apparently capable
enough to simply function in the world without any support at all,
despite his lordship here saying she still has difficulty fitting into
behaviour patterns determined by your specialists that define the
paradigm in the first place. What the actual fuck!

THE DIRECTOR
Well, to be fair, I'm a professional director workshopping arts practice
by...

MUM/DAD
Ah shut the hell up.

SOCIAL WORKER
Hmmm. I can understand you're frustrated.

MUM/DAD
And?! But?! You're still not going to do anything about it are you,
because your hands are tied by a system that you are in control of in the
first place.

SOCIAL WORKER

(the Social Worker makes moves as if to go)
Well, no, not really but yes, I can see this can be difficult for you but I'm
afraid we have come as far as we can and unfortunately we can't do
anymore. I hope you and your family continue to be a part of our
community and you are more than welcome to...

MUM/DAD
Ahh blow it out your A.R.S.

The Social Worker leaves

MUM/DAD
Come on Tahlia, lets get out of here.

MUM/DAD storms out.

A bright light and the scream of a
tinnitus ring when he speaks.

THE DIRECTOR
Tahlia?

A bright light and the scream of a
tinnitus ring when he speaks.

THE DIRECTOR
Tahlia!

                    A bright light and the scream of a
                    tinnitus ring when he speaks.

                    THE DIRECTOR
Tahlia, I've been talking with some people. Tahlia I think I have a plan.

                    A bright light and the scream of a
                    tinnitus ring when he speaks.

                    Blackout.

IMAGE 4: *'Tahlia' is abandoned*

SCENE 9

                    Tahlia is alone on stage stimming and
                    playing methodically with a toy;
                    trains, organisisng something. The two
                    actors sit nearby, bored and waiting.
                    One of the actors takes off his shoe
                    and checks for stones.

                    ACTOR 1
If you do another vague Godot reference again I swear I'm gonna...

                    ACTOR 2
Well what do we do while we're waiting?

ACTOR 1
We could get back to writing that thesis.

                              ACTOR 2
Oh, God I'm so sick of that process. Have you spent any real time in that
department, they're all weird in there.

                              ACTOR 1
I know. I once did a shift with them when she was trying to write a
chapter. Ego and self-doubt were arguing in the corner and it just made
the whole experience very uncomfortable. It wasn't until Protestant work
ethic stepped in that we could finally get any work done at all. Nazi.

                              ACTOR 2
She's been stimming for hours

                              ACTOR 1
I know

                              ACTOR 2
I haven't seen her this upset since, well, I can't even remember.

                              ACTOR 1
I know.

                              ACTOR 2
I love how it's the same stim for happiness as it is for distress.

                              ACTOR 1
Hmm.

                              ACTOR 2
I mean we're an advocate for them not a burden, especially as its their
half arsed diagnosis that's cause so many more of these problems than
there should be.

                              ACTOR 1
Preaching to the choir there sunshine.

                              ACTOR 2
Studying two degrees, speaking at political rallies, made the state
croquet squad. I mean how many people can claim as much?

                              ACTOR 1
I know

                              ACTOR 2
You know if it weren't for our physical contact issues I would have
launched a powerful argument for us to punch them out.

                              ACTOR 1

You really are the emotional touchy-feely aspect of us aren't you?

<center>ACTOR 2</center>

You know what I really miss about it all?

<center>ACTOR 1</center>

No surprises there.

<center>ACTOR 2</center>

I just loved the way it made us feel.

<center>ACTOR 1</center>

People listened to us for one thing.

<center>ACTOR 2</center>

Yeah, without answering back.

<center>ACTOR 1</center>

What's the point of teaching us to communicate the way they want and then not bothering to listen?

<center>ACTOR 2</center>

Look out, here's trouble.

<center>Sound effect as if the Director enters</center>

<center>THE DIRECTOR</center>

Hi Tahlia. I hope I'm not interrupting.

<center>TAHLIA</center>

No, just talking to myself

<center>THE DIRECTOR</center>

Ah, the fist sign of madness

<center>TAHLIA</center>

That's not funny.

<center>THE DIRECTOR</center>

No. Sorry.

<center>TAHLIA</center>

What do you want.

<center>THE DIRECTOR</center>

Look, I wanted to apologise for the way you have been dumped. It wasn't what I wanted for you, I think we were making some real progress in your acting regardless of whether or not it makes you more 'normal'.

<center>Tahlia doesn't respond</center>

THE DIRECTOR
I mean it puts me out too what with losing another gig.

                                        Tahlia doesn't respond

                                        THE DIRECTOR
So I was thinking there might be an opportunity to take this further if
you're interested.

                                        TAHLIA
Like how?

                                        THE DIRECTOR
Well, let me start by asking you what you want from the work we have
been doing?

                                        TAHLIA
I don't know. I want people to listen to me. I want to feel like my
opinion matters. I want my own identity.

                                        THE DIRECTOR
What do you mean?

                                        TAHLIA
I mean I want to know how it feels

                                        THE DIRECTOR
How what feels?

                                        Tahlia doesn't respond

                                        ACTOR 1
How it feels to be listened to

                                        ACTOR 2
How it feels to be applauded

                                        TAHLIA
I want them to feel how it feels

                                        ACTOR 1 & ACTOR 2
Yes

                                        THE DIRECTOR
I understand.

                                        Tahlia arranges her objects

                                        THE DIRECTOR
Can I share something with you?

SCENE 10

Lights dim on Tahlia and The Director

ACTOR 1

I am ten years old. I have just moved to the city from the country. I am
the target, for everyone. On my first day at school. I look over the
quadrangle to see the school hoods, the cool guys, eyeing me off,
checking me out, sizing me up. Long trousers, brown leather shoes, a
long sleeve collard shirt tucked into them. Easy target. Righto, send in
Jamie. Jamie. The smallest of the group. Little person syndrome. I
thought he was their mascot. He starts insulting me. I'm stunned. Then
he starts to push me. Where I come from, the little kids dont take on the
big kids. I push him back, just a little 'back off man', nothing heavy. He
is so small he falls flat on his arse and scratches up his arm. That's why
the little ones avoid the big ones. But in this case he was just a scout, the
big ones are the back up and their all walking this way.

ACTOR 2

Two years of relentless physical and psychological abuse later and its
time for the annual year seven graduating musical production. Everyone
has to audition, in front of everyone else. Are you fucking kidding me?
You want me to stand up in front of 150 students who all would like to
see me hanging from a tree like a pinata so its easier than chasing me
around the school and sing? I shuffle back to the end of the line, and
back and back and back. Finally, cant avoid it anymore, no one left in
front of me. All the cool kids, the leaders of the gang, have all the lead
parts so far. I am so close to losing my bowels with fear, the only thing
holding it back is imagining what that will do to my life if I let that
happen. A sea of faces. So my only two options are sing or shit myself
in front of everyone. A sea of faces. No safety in the teachers, they've
herded each student to the audition spot like a gestapo officer. A sea of
faces. Sing or shit, sing or shit. A sea of faces. I clench so hard I could
have made a fucking diamond.

ACTOR 1

The mad old Indian Drama teachers interrupts my year 9 maths class,
insisting that he has the principal's permission to excuse me for the rest
of the term while I replace the lead actor in the year 10 major production
for the year. I guess its an act of faith in me? I didn't have time to ask.
The show was on in less than a week. The lead role is the leader of a
gang of kids who torments and bullies a fellow student to the point
where he kills himself. The character is remorseless and unapologetic.
He is bad and he's looking for a fight. Talk about emotional recall. I had

over 5 years at the hands of guys and girls like this. And then the kicker, we were performing to the whole student body. Three shows across all year levels. Great. At least I will be able to completely isolate myself even further without missing anyone. I could feel my bowels clenching again. It had been awhile since I made that last diamond. Could my sphincter do it again? Fuck yes it could. I'm gonna act the hell out of this. None of you pricks are as hard as me right here, right now. Get in the ring mother fucker and I'll kick your bitchy little ass.

ACTOR 2

A few days later I am walking through the local shopping centre with my Mum. About 100 meters away I see him. He is big, he is ugly, he is the living embodiment of the character I just played. I based a lot of the character on him, after all I got a pretty close look at it when he randomly chose me to beat up on. Oh shit, he's seen me. Its Ok I'm with my Mum. He wouldn't give a fuck, he'd abuse me anyway. Diamond time. He's calling out.

ACTOR 1

Hey Danno.

ACTOR 2

Oh shit he's calling out. But, that's not my name... that's the name of the character. Oh shit he saw the play. Well it doesn't surprise me, why should he know my name. He never wanted a social relationship, he only needed a punching bag.

ACTOR 1

I said, hey, Danno. Fuckn onya mate! Awesome.

ACTOR 2

And then he gives me the thumbs up and walks away. What the fuck was that? I was stunned. He liked the performance? He liked the character? I never found out. He never bothered me again and I didn't want to risk it by asking. The more shows I did, the less the bullying.

ACTOR 1

I kind of became popular, at least I was accepted in my own right.

ACTOR 2

Certainly everyone was happy with me giving the valedictory.

ACTOR 1

A warped journey of self and public identity

ACTOR 2

constructed from strange imaginary characters performed on a stage...

ACTOR 1 & ACTOR 2

what's going on here?

Lights back up on Tahlia and The
Director

THE DIRECTOR
I work with a group of people and all want the same thing. We don't fit
in, we want to feel special and we want to tell our stories. We want to
challenge meaning and make great theatre. I was wondering if you
would like to join us.

The actors look at her waiting for a
response. She finally nods.

IMAGE 5: *Nicole Allen as 'Actor 2' demonstrates how to act for Tahlia*

SCENE 11

A moved sequence follows Tahlia and
the two actors are working on physical
and vocal exercises that are typical of
an acting class. It is akin to a
superhero/Rocky/sports montage.

This can be staged however the cast
decide but they start very
uncoordinated and develop into
something that is
cohesive/beautiful/interesting. This
sequence shows the evolution of
seemingly diverse elements, warm-up
exercises and the like, coalesce into a
unified unit.

The original production was set to the Rocky theme which was also suitable for its length.

Actor 1; fluid, expressive, improvisational.

Actor 2; stiff, stilted, mechanical

Finally they achieve success.

                         ACTOR 2
That was great

                         ACTOR 1
Yeah, felt good.

                         ACTOR 2
I really liked your 'rag doll' image. You often use that one don't you?

                         ACTOR 1
Yes, yes I do... I noticed you did your King Lear (Lady Macbeth), again. You've been working on that for some years now haven't you?

                         ACTOR 2
What are you trying to say?

                         ACTOR 1
Nothing, nothing. I just noticed that you tend to... fall back on it a bit, that's all

                         ACTOR 2
Well I guess its got a little more substance to it than a mimed glass box...

                         ACTOR 1 & ACTOR 2
Bitch

The two actors walk away from each other.
Tahlia is agitated and stimming wildly

                         THE DIRECTOR
How did that feel?

                         TAHLIA
I definitely preferred it when we got told what to say

                         THE DIRECTOR
What?

TAHLIA
Well I knew what was going to...

                           THE DIRECTOR
No I heard you. I'm just a bit confused. You want to be told what to say?

                              TAHLIA
Yes

                           THE DIRECTOR
You want to be told what to do?

                              TAHLIA
Yes

                           THE DIRECTOR
Then, why are you here?

                              TAHLIA
Well, I just don't like it when it's all over the place. There needs to be
order. I just don't know what's going to happen next.

                           THE DIRECTOR
And that's what's exciting. Tahlia, order is creative not oppressive. Is
this a block? What are you afraid of?

                                        Tahlia is silent. The actors sit back
                                        thankful for the rest.

                           THE DIRECTOR
Tahlia creativity is about solving problems that rules create. Look,
everyday you play a part. You play a part that is defined by others;
doctors, teachers, social workers, funding... Everyday you wake up and
interact with these other people, you playing your part and them playing
theirs. It doesn't mean you don't have your own thoughts and feelings or
that you can't interact with these other characters... All the world's a
stage after all. And every day we try and find a moment which makes us
happy, fulfils a desire, puts a smile on our face. These feelings come
from playing within the rules of the game. Now, here it is no different.
The rules of the theatre tell us who is allowed to speak and who must
listen, what is real and what is fantasy. All those people must sit in the
dark and listen to what you say. You can suspend the relationships of
the everyday for new relationships between actor and audience. In this
place, with these rules, you can create time and space. And in that
suspension of everyday relationships lies the chance to chase those
feelings again. And that is why they are here too, they want the rules in
place just as you do so that they can fly and feel the magic, just the same
as you. You can't be creative in a vacuum with no rules. And rules are
worthless unless they can make you feel better. Theatre will give so
much but you have to give it something first. Even if that's nothing more
than trust.

Tahlia lets this sink in and then physically responds with the actors.

THE DIRECTOR

Now, let's get back to work.

Blackout

SCENE 12

A 'white noise' of people as, as in a mall, gradually becomes louder over the murmur of the audience. As it becomes louder individual phrases and comments from different people (interviews, news readers, part conversations etc) can be heard more audibly as they rise to the surface in the wash of sound and retreat again.

This can be a repeat of scene 1 or an edited version of it.

Its autism, not bad parenting
Nothing about us without us, nothing about us without us
...The autism epidemic...
he falls to the floor, kicking and screaming, it's just his way of coping
If I were president I would push for proper vaccinations but would not allow one-time massive shots that a small child cannot take
...I'm a good driver, definitely a good driver...
I just don't understand what the point of all this knowledge is
I won't change the way my child sees the world because he helps me see it clearer and that's a joy in itself
...yeah I just saw your photo, you look so autistic. I don't need no special kids following me...
...the increasing use of autism as an insult...

The volume builds and becomes almost too loud when suddenly the sound stops as the lights go to black.

SCENE 13

In the darkness the voice, as of a director, guides the imagery. By the end of the speech the lights have come up on a lone figure on stage who is stimming.

THE DIRECTOR

Stand in a neutral position. Run your minds eye through your body. Where are you holding tension? Start from the feet. Are your toes relaxed? Check your legs, are your knees locked? Now move your mind's eye up through your pelvis and stomach. Be sure that you are breathing down into your stomach. Is your chest tight? Are your shoulders relaxed. Run your thoughts through your hands and fingers. Really investigate in detail how your body is in space. Your neck and face. Relax your jaw and breath through your mouth. And just be in that moment for awhile. Now when you are ready, open your eyes, look at your audience, start to speak the thoughts that come to you.

TAHLIA

...

THE DIRECTOR

Tahlia? Are you with us?

TAHLIA

Yes.

THE DIRECTOR

And what do you want to say?

The lights flicker

Tahlia stands in a spotlight.

Blackout

IMAGE 6: the cast, *Nicole Allen, Tahlia and Mark Hamill*

VOLUME 2

CHAPTER 1

Introduction & Key Concepts

A night at the theatre

The starting point for this research is based on a performance I saw of a show that SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY had devised called 'Out of Shot' in 2009. A few days earlier I had been to see what was considered a professional production of a new play. It was a production starring many leading actors and artists in the local industry and was the result of many years creative development with the highest (and most expensive) production values that money could buy. However the performance left me (and most of the audience) flat, disconnected and rather ambivalent. I would not remember it at all now except for the fact that a few days later I saw the performance of 'Out of Shot', which was almost exactly opposite in every facet. The ensemble were not part of an organised independent company at this stage; instead they were a social inclusion program run by the state autism advocacy organisation and services provider, Autism Respect Services (A.R.S.). The actors were not trained or experienced (often they looked a little uncomfortable just being onstage), the script had only a few months development, the running time was only thirty minutes and the technical production was minimal to say the least. Yet I was profoundly moved by the show, the characters, the narrative and the abstract representations of ideas were compelling. I engaged with the journey of the characters and felt empathy for the overall experience of the 'other' that was being represented using metaphor and allegory. I left asking myself what was going on when the cream of the professional industry could not, with all their resources, deliver a performance as moving as a social group of untrained actors all on the autism spectrum who all displayed physical discomfort in the exposed environment of the stage.

What I did know about the performance was that the Artistic Director of the piece was a friend of mine who was both on the spectrum of autism and a trained actor. We had both attended the same acting college and although we attended in different years, our training was based in the same methodologies and taught by the same instructors. Our relationship extends even further back when we were members of a youth dance company. At that time everyone knew that Mark was 'different' but it was many years later before he would be diagnosed with Apserger's Syndrome, a higher functioning aspect of autism.

So immediately, this performance was couched in many layers of context, most notably for me, the collision between autism and acting. To my mind and experience autism was a natural inhibitor to any deep transformative acting. How do people who can't read or embody unspoken social dialogue ever communicate it? One of the key questions I ask actors in rehearsals is 'How do you feel?' How do you deal with actors when that question alone is so complicated? I was fascinated because this was a performance, a piece of theatre that communicated subtle abstract concepts, drama and (most challengingly) comedy to an audience who were riveted by the metaphor and emotion being represented onstage. Obviously Mark, with his training, professional experiences and being on the spectrum was able to bridge a seemingly impossible chasm of understanding. In fact as my research uncovered, it was precisely because of his training and technical framework as a theatre maker that he was able to pass on the knowledge and skills of a working actor on stage. In turn this created a framework for the untrained actors in the cast to communicate effectively in this most densely layered environments of social masks.

Many, many questions ran through my mind at the end of this performance; it challenged so many of my deeply held beliefs about acting and the people who can or cannot do it. The first obvious question was 'what then is autism?' The physical and emotional rigor that a trained professional actor undergoes in the course of developing a craft is for the purpose of communicating complex states of psychological and emotional awareness and performance. To fully comprehend the distance between the taken-for-granted assumptions of what actors do and the phenomenon of an all-autistic theatre performance, I needed to explore more about just what autism is and how it compares to the attributes of an actor. Hence I began with my preconceived ideas about autism. Initially it appeared to me that autism existed in a state somewhere between a social disorder and a pathological defection. Observably, those on the spectrum are identified in the first place by their behaviours in social spaces. But there is also a diagnosis, a psychiatric empiricism that defines the condition, wasn't there? I had heard fears of an epidemic of diagnoses in recent years, indicative of a wider social awareness of the issue. As a teacher and artist-in-residence within school environments I was certainly aware that I was being informed of more children with autism in my classes. Obviously my limited understanding of autism was based in hearsay and subjectivity without any real substance. There is an unspoken assumption about most actors, that you either have it or you don't and whatever I thought I knew about autism I definitely put autism in the 'you don't' category.

So the experience of seeing a show created and performed by an ensemble, all of which are on the Autism Spectrum invites a unique opportunity to explore the ideas of acting both socially and

performatively. On the one hand there is the condition of Autism, which speaks to the ideas of acting appropriate social behaviour. On the other hand there is the craft of acting for performance, an idea that is rooted in invoking emotional responses in an audience via metaphor and drama, indeed in the ability to behave in ways that are the antithesis of everyday social behaviour. In both examples, the idea of phenomenological enacted social behaviour was at the core of both practices. I had so many questions about how I would go about working with autistic actors in a rehearsal room. Some of them do not like to be touched; some of them could not engage with eye contact or cannot stand to be in bare feet for example. How do you direct an actor when a fundamental question during a rehearsal process is 'how does that feel'; where that question alone invokes Ponty-esque notions of the visible and invisible position of a body in space and psychological ways of understanding. How do you direct actors without a sense of the character/emotional/narrative arc of a scene or indeed a whole play? How do you improvise a scene or character with someone who cannot grasp or interpret emotional metaphor? How, despite all this, did I just watch a performance that invoked all these things in an audience?

Research Focus

This research project then is an exploration of the theatre-making group that is SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY. Over the coming pages I will recount the experiences of my fieldwork with them and try to get at understanding some of these questions. In this chapter I will dedicate space to some of the key concepts from my fieldwork, which will form the basis of analysis in the coming chapters. The remainder of this chapter will address the frameworks by which both autism and acting are defined and key theoretical concepts. The governance and support services of both the art and autism play a significant role in this journey and highlight the place of the autistic person and actor in a broader community. Also, I will background the traditional ideas about acting for performance, exploring anthropological aspects of phenomenology and how they have been explored in the actor's craft. There is a global industry of actor training colleges in methods that have been developed over the last century and I will show how the history of these ideas have framed the idea of what an actor is and can do, and by doing so also frame the other, those who lack the 'right stuff' (to borrow a movie metaphor) to be emotionally charged craftsmen or women. I will conclude by arguing for a performed ethnographic analysis, which articulates the theoretical ideas presented here in an enactive experience, which challenges and allows for the observation of these embodied socio-cultural experiences in both a lived and visceral engagement.

I must make it clear that in this research, I am not trying to speak for autism. The condition does however act as a lightning rod to understand the social phenomenon of theatre and in turn has revealed ways of conceiving both autism and theatre as things in and of themselves. In essence, a project like

this needs to be lifted from the page in order to invoke a truer experience of the other in this research. After all, the informants of the company are in some ways writing their own culture, and so too I feel that this project has the opportunity to engage with the debates about writing culture that exist within the discipline of anthropology. It is my view that a research project such as this can only benefit from a delivery model that surpasses the written word. By that I mean that the final component of the thesis, in addition to this exegesis, is a play script and a recording of that script's interpretation in performance. It is not a play that acts as an ethnographic description of fieldwork because the work of SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY is intended to speak for the participants. The work they create is their attempt at speaking for themselves. It would be counter productive therefore to write a play that aims to recreate their lived experiences. Instead, the play and its performance is intended to articulate ideas explored in the space where autism and acting meet. As you will read in the words to follow, the performance of a play engages intuitively the processes and experiences that anthropology seeks to explore via theorising phenomenology and other disciplines including psychology and even neurology.

A Crucible of Social Intent

Performing, particularly for the stage, is a result of many interconnected layers of everyday life structures and techniques blended in such a way as to suspend and re-imagine, even if for only a short time, those same structures. In everyday life these influencing structures are cultural norms in the context of social spaces. In the theatre, the physical management of space defines them; an audience sits in bleachers in the dark facing the illuminated space of the stage or performing area whereupon the performers act. Permission to enter this space is based on the economic transactions of purchasing tickets, which themselves determine the location of seats in the auditorium (closer to the stage or further away for example) and can reflect status based on economic position as better seats usually cost more money. These structures of the theatrically performed event mirror, at the micro level, the social and everyday spaces of performance in a metaphorical and/or allegorical fashion. That is to say that the concepts of authority and status, who is allowed to speak and listen, the physical space that people can occupy based on their status as well as the representations of social relationships presented onstage are reflective of everyday social transactions, albeit in a redefined and distilled time-space. What is performed onstage is a reflection or manifestation of the environments and relationships of the community in which the performance is based in a kind of semiotic approach (Goffman 1975, Rozik 2010, Schechner 1988, Stewart 1993). It is this distinction that can make the 'actor' and their efforts either appropriate or inappropriate. The effectiveness of the actor and their efforts are dependent on the context of relationships that surround it; public space, private space, paid entertainment and so on (Brook 1968, Schechner 1988, Schechner 1990, Turner 1982, Turner 1988). This concept is at the crux

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of performance and it is worth exploring this further to understand the unique place that an autistic theatre company inhabits in the context of this research at least. I will begin with how embodied acting is conceptualized and understood within anthropology and move on to show how this understanding related to both the actor and the autistic.

Performing, specifically performing socially, has been at the core of much anthropology. I could start anywhere to discuss the anthropological background of what is performance, but for the purposes of this research I will explore the ideas of Turner and Merleau-Ponty as they speak to thoughts of practice and experience. Turner has written several accounts of his fieldwork exploring the nature of performance in both social and performative practice (Turner 1982, Turner 1988). Rituals and symbolism play a large part in his research on ceremonial events and practices. Exploring the metaphors and symbolism in ritual performance that are based in tribal and religious practice opens up the chance to explore how prescribed performance is reflective and constructive of everyday social experience. The practices of child to adult, tribal member to tribal elder, living relation to spiritual ancestor all involve rituals, which Turner asserts follow patterns of behaviour rooted in performance as a means of movement between social status. Ideas of liminal space, breech-crisis-redress, and the community observations which in turn authorize the meaning and identities of the participants all derive from this essential understanding that humans perform with respect to their social frame works. These performances are characterised by the authorities given to particular actors in ritual behaviour, which themselves are reflective of the social order within which they exist.

Moving to the works of Merleau-Ponty, it can be seen how the introspective gaze of the actor poses questions about the embodied experience. His thinking questioned the Cartesian dualistic approach to mind and body that had become a dominant view (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). By re-conceptualising the internal and external experience of the world it gives rise to ideas about embodied phenomenology. Perceiving that the world around you is by definition determined by the way your entire sensory and mental capacities interact with each other, is useful in the debate about autism and theatre performance. Marrying the ideas of phenomenological embodied experience with ritualistic representations of the actor in a social sphere has given rise to further explorations of how humans engage in social acts. This relationship between everyday social performances and staged theatrical ones will be explored further in chapter three, for the moment it is enough to preface the ideas and contexts of the idea of acting socially developed by Bateson (1946), Goffmann (1975), Schechner (1985), Turner (1988), Barba (1995); all of them invoke at least the metaphor of theatre and performance in everyday social exchange. Bateson for example, in his reckonings on schismogenisis,

invokes the concepts of drama in the theatre (Bateson,1942, 1946). Two people (actors) engage in a clash of intent, which provokes either symmetrical or complimentary schismogenic behaviour. Turner advocates that plays provide a unique means of understanding the 'other' from research by recognising that performance is a framed social event prescribed by ritual performed at the margins of everyday social activity (Schechner 1985, Turner 1982, 1988). Performance as defined in particular social engagements provides then an opportunity for the performer and the audience to gaze introspectively at social meaning and habitus and is an extension of the Merleau-Ponty perspective.

These early understandings of performance have been co-opted and applied to the practice of theatre performance because they provide an opportunity to investigate a social process of observing, as much as is possible, a body that in everyday social acts is "essentially characterized by absence" as Leder may put it (Leder 1990, 1) and by extension, absent cultures these representations project. The frameworks that define these social performances on the margins of everyday social interaction mimic or reflect those same structures and this is important for audiences to engage with the act. However, this marginal status is somewhat liminal as well by association and hence allows for the unusual manipulation of everyday social signs to be reconfigured and adapted for the universe that lives on the stage. As such the everyday meanings can then also be changed as the audiences re-engages with new perspectives. Hence anthropologists have explored how these frameworks of process invite this in both local and universal contexts.

Anthropology has been investigating acting and performance within this paradigm. Schechner theorises how theatre performance creates effects in the viewer that allow for an intimate understanding of the other via presence (Schechner, 1988). Barba has developed theoretical ideas of universal embodied pre-communicative practices (Barba, 1995) and Zarrilli (2004, 2008) has explored the internal world of the actor through the prism of embodied phenomenology. These authors acknowledge that theatre has a reflexive ability to investigate the internal lived world of the body and the body in social space via the codes of conduct that shape cultural gaze in the first place.

It has been identified that a relationship between social act and theatrical acts reflect and construct ideas about each other. These premises have been explored and applied across anthropological discourse including Scheiffele (2001), Allen (1995), Beeman (1993), Bagely (2008) and Schechner (1985, 1990) who have explored this interdependence and thus have prepared the ground work for an explanatory power of theatre beyond the scope of external observation. These ideas will be explored in greater detail in chapter three. When approaching the work of this research it appears on the surface

that both acting for the stage and acting socially as an autistic person may appear to be diametrically opposed. But it is also evident that the work of these authors seeks to explore and understand the lived experience via the paradigm of performance. And so in order to understand a bit more about how this gap between taken for granted restrictions to social performance and therefore dramatic performance can be bridged I will explore contemporary meanings of actors and people with autism.

Acting and Performance

Notions such as believability and presence generally determine the success or failure of an actor's efforts in the moment. But this projection of believability is not random, instead it is the result of craft and technique that has been nurtured and deliberated on to a point where the actor can perform almost intuitively and in conversation as it were with their audience (Schieffelin 1996). Young or emerging actors have a plethora of training institutions to choose from dedicated to teaching the techniques and crafts of acting. In Beigeville, the city in which my fieldwork took place, an individual can engage with many companies and organisations in the various skills and techniques of performance from pre-school age. There is school, community, tertiary, amateur, semi-professional and professional outlets. People can engage with the act of live performance at a level of craft and technique that they are both comfortable with and appropriate for. For actors who want to pursue a career though, there is an expected journey of education in the crafts and techniques of acting that one has to undergo in order to be considered a professional in their job. Acting institutions such as the local Beigeville College for the Arts and Urban University Drama Centre provide rigorous three-year programs in various performance styles such as singing, movement, acting technique and theory. It is accepted within the wider industry that upon completion of this course, the graduate has grounding in various work practices that make them employable in a variety of performing jobs that might be expected of them in their career. As a producer and director myself, understanding this type of apprenticeship relates directly to employability; I am more likely to employ an actor who I know has some sense of professional training as opposed to someone who is a hobbyist. I know that I can talk with the actor on a deeper technical level about the work because we share a common language of technique and craft. Technique and craft is a significant focus of advanced actor training with many countless courses, books and opinions of the subject as well as online forums and blogs.

There are many important acting theorists that have emerged throughout the twentieth century to develop such techniques. Most can trace the roots of their work to Konstantin Stanislavsky who pioneered the collating of exercises into a technique or system for the actor so as they can attain some emotional truth to their performance;

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The merit of my work …consisted in my endeavors to be sincere and to search for truth. I hated all falsehood on the stage, especially theatrical falsehood. (Magarshack quoting Stanislavsky 1936)

The many philosophies of acting born of his ideas and encompassing all manner of lived experience have been distilled into other replicable techniques such as Laban/Malmgren Movement Psychology, Meisner, Strasberg, Artaud and Grotowski. Possibly the earliest attempt at grasping this idea of structure and an example of these ideas in the theatre throughout history can be seen in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet';

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to
you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it,
as many of your players do, I had as lief the
town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air
too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently;
for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say,
the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget
a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it
offends me to the soul to hear a robustious
periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to
very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who
for the most part are capable of nothing but
inexplicable dumbshows and noise: I would have such
a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it
out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it.
(Shakespeare 2004)

It goes on, but you can immediately sense that Hamlet (Shakespeare) is identifying the distinction between mimicry and embodiment. It is not enough to 'mouth it', instead you 'must acquire a temperance', to do otherwise dilutes the realism of the experience and creates instead 'dumbshows and noise'. Henceforth acting techniques can broadly be categorised into two primary areas; that of the psychological (structural) and the phenomenological (corporeal) as a means to accessing this embodiment. Superior understanding of any one technique though does not mean that the actor is by

extension a superior actor. The great Konstantin Stanislavsky, who is credited for laying the foundations of modern acting techniques clearly recognised this;

> *it is necessary to rid oneself of the prejudice that it is possible to teach people 'to act'*
> *certain feelings. It can, I think, be stated quite definitively that no one can be taught to act*
> (Stanislavsky 1937: 91)

Descendants of this thinking approach technique from completely opposite perspectives as with 'the method's' internal investigation of character and Meisner's external focus on the actor. Given that modern acting techniques themselves are struggling with harmonising the corporeal experience and the psychological mechanics of achieving it, there is much debate for and against technique for actors as they search for the 'truth' of a performed moment. The spectrum of techniques span the rigid systems of Strasberg, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold to the search for the embodied essence of being; Artaud, Growtoski, Improvisational theatre and Gestalt theatre. Within that spectrum there are also those who opt for a middle ground such as the Laban movement/psychology technique. Based in the theories of archetypes established by Jung, this approach is also echoed in anthropological understandings of social agency (Laughlin and Tiberia 2012). What can be gleaned from this discourse and the institutions that teach them is that the act of acting is conceptualised via the hermeneutic relationship between structures of technique and behavior of the 'absent body' (Zarrill 2004, Leder 1990, Schechner 1985). Ultimately the training actor will draw on many but probably not all these techniques. There are fewer and fewer institutions that privilege any technique instead treating them all as tools for an actor to draw on based on the creative process of a project or job. Ultimately however, the goal is to affect a 'believable' performance, whichever approach the actor uses.

The space of theatrical performance is itself a system of physical and social structures that both interact visibly and invisibly. An audience member has to make a conscious decision to get up off the couch, get in their car, deal with parking and other pragmatic details in order to actually get to the theatre. These acts in themselves require the audience member to be mentally engaged with the act of seeing something and attuned to a potential experience long before the performance takes place. Upon arrival at the venue they must enter the building by defined entrances (you cannot just walk in through the back-stage door). Seats are allocated often with numbers, rows and so on. Higher priced tickets are offered for better seating and cheaper seats further away reflecting an economic value system on location and proximity to action. Programs with notes about the company, director, and cast members can be purchased. These ephemera both enlighten the audience to themes, ideas and methodologies

of the creative process and the performers; but are also a physical embodiment and reminder that the action about to be (or previously) experienced is a façade presented by people who lead vastly different lives to the ones you are about to watch. The action is begun once everyday lights (colloquially known as house lights) in the auditorium are dimmed and the much more vibrant colours and intensity of stage lighting illuminates the performance space. Sometimes a curtain on the stage is raised at this time too. These last acts are a visual cue for the audience to become quiet and give over to the sound and movement of the performers onstage. It can be seen here that collectively all these activities are a process by which one physically and socially suspends the everyday routines, practice and behaviour of social life and voluntarily assumes a yielding position in a relationship with actors presenting an experience. Furthermmore, this collision of suspended and affected social behaviour cohabit the same mental, physical and emotional corporeality of both the audience member and the actor.

The audience sits in the dark, the actors in the light as they weave their magic creating suspension of disbelief, and reimagining time and space for a short while. This physical barrier between performers and audience is often understood in practice as the fourth wall; where characters onstage are oblivious that there are hundreds of people watching them while actors simultaneously playing the characters are acutely aware of the shared dynamic in the room. So here is a social phenomenon whereby people voluntarily enter a space and engage in an unwritten arrangement with the performers, wherein the everyday is suspended. Audience and actors alike give themselves over to a complex social arrangement, which allow the possibility of a corporeal experience; individuals sit amongst a group sharing a collective creative expression at once completely aware of their environment while also embedded in the fantasy that is the experience of the play. Maybe this is the true value of technique and training, the ability to live in two states of consciousness at the same time, an awareness and control over what type of wink one is performing as in Geertz's famous analogy of the thick description (Geertz 1973). Certainly from a psychological perspective, actors meet the fourteen dimensions of subjective experience (Scheiffele, 2001) and even though Scheiffele only speaks to these with respect to the actor, it can easily be applied to the experience of the audience as well. Regardless of the deeper analysis of this aspect, it can be seen that for an individual to navigate all that is required of them as an actor, requires a level of awareness about multiple environments and the ability to communicate a reality that is distinct from all of them to an audience with precision and clarity of meaning. So how do we reconcile all this with respect to a person on the autism spectrum?

Autism

Autism is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which places it squarely in the realm of psychological or mental disorder. According to the manual a mental disorder,

> *is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other important activities.* (APA 2013)

The definition in the most recent publication in 2013 has made some amendments to the diagnostic criteria and categories of autism *"in efforts to increase diagnostic sensitivity and specificity"* (Huerta et al 2012). Current DSM-5 diagnostic parameters state that:

> *People with ASD tend to have communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items. Again, the symptoms of people with ASD will fall on a continuum, with some individuals showing mild symptoms and others having much more severe symptoms. This spectrum will allow clinicians to account for the variations in symptoms and behaviors from person to person.*
> *Under the DSM-5 criteria, individuals with ASD must show symptoms from early childhood, even if those symptoms are not recognized until later. This criteria change encourages earlier diagnosis of ASD but also allows people whose symptoms may not be fully recognized until social demands exceed their capacity to receive the diagnosis. It is an important change from DSM-IV criteria, which was geared toward identifying school-aged children with autism-related disorders, but not as useful in diagnosing younger children.*
> (APA 2013)

What is apparent from the variations on a theme regarding the definition of autism is that degrees of aptitude to non-verbal social situations outside of a range of 'normal' behaviour are the key signifier in any diagnosis. By that, I mean that an individuals capacity to engage socially at an appropriate level to their age and expected maturity. For an anthropologist, this is a context that is very contentious. The

identification, treatment and social inclusion (or otherwise) of a group of people primarily based upon cultural degrees of behaving outside of 'normal social behaviour'; it is a wilderness of anthropological investigation and contestability. The efforts of the APA and researchers around the globe have sought to define and specify these diagnostic parameters, ironically in doing this they have broadened over the decades the definition of the condition since it was first identified in 1949 by Dr. Leo Kanner (Wolff 2004). As more detailed research has emerged over the years the notion of a spectrum sits well within a traditional empiricism as autism is subject to identification and intensity based on a variable range of social frameworks.

There is no clear or single example or definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder. At its essence it is described as a neurological disorder. It presents itself in individuals through varying degrees of social and communicative ability. There is some evidence that there are genetic roots to the condition (Jacquemont et al 2014, Rattan 2014) but any comprehensive causal effect is still to be agreed on due to the vast complexities of this data. The DSM-5 states quite succinctly though, that it is first identified, and then quantified based on uniquely social criteria:

> *deficits in social-emotional reciprocity… deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours…deficits in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships* (APA 2013)

Quite clearly this is a condition that is identified because of its social anomaly and one that has been identified and codified by the psychiatric sciences, placing it within the discourse of medicine. Hansen and Rogers (2013) give a comprehensive list of the diagnostic parameters with which autism is identified. Although this was published before the introduction of the DSM-5 it can be clearly seen that the diagnostic procedures include a combination of the social, "Autism Diagnostics Interview" (Hus & Lord 2013, Cholemkery et al 2014) and the biomedical (see Hansen and Roger 2013) "Physical and neurological examination is critical to identify recognizable genetic syndromes highly associated with ASD".

Due to this history in medical science, autism, by association, becomes an issue of curing, fixing or normalising the condition and this is where acting for the stage enters the scene. The process of actor training in this quest for fixing the problem, as it were, has been used as a means of teaching normalised behaviour with, for example, its *"novel intervention program aimed at improving reciprocal social interaction in youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) using behavioral strategies and*

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theatrical techniques" (Corbett et al 2014; 4) and hence re-enforcing the view of the autistic body as both a social and biomedical dilema. Subsequently technologies and learning systems, behavioural therapy and support organisations, government funding and specialised services have developed around the condition and all of them with the taken-for-granted assumption that ASD is firstly a disability and secondly that it is potentially curable in the long term and at least manageable in the short term; (Chasen 2011; Schneider 2006 and Nelson 2010). Certainly there have been examples of greater agency by those who have engaged in the process of acting and putting on a play (Autism the Musical 2007). However a question needs to be asked if the self confidence of the individual is directly a result of practice in structured social situations as in a play, or by virtue of the fact that anyone standing in front of a large audience and receiving applause and ovations does intrinsically feel better about themselves. Regardless, this narrative informs the frameworks of perception about autism and people's responses to it; social awkwardness due to a retardation of typical functioning. In turn this reinforces the social identification of an 'other' and the social meaning loop evolves and strengthens its hold on the identification and objectification of those on the spectrum.

Needless to say there are many groups and organisations who identify with this framing of the condition and who advocate both for the place of autistic people as part of everyday society as well as seeking cures and therapies that normalize the behaviour. Autism Speaks, for example

> *has grown into the world's leading autism science and advocacy organization, dedicated to funding research into the causes, prevention, treatments and a cure for autism; increasing awareness of autism spectrum disorders; and advocating for the needs of individuals with autism and their families* (Autism speaks.org 2013)

Autism Speaks is openly engaged in (although I think unwittingly) the dilemma of acceptance of people on the spectrum while simultaneously trying to find ways of eliminating this problematic condition as an issue in the future. The idea of advocacy for any group is fraught with issues surrounding who has the right to speak and on whose behalf. Indeed Autism Speaks has regularly been attacked for its various philosophies and methodologies and because of its tendency to advocate for the organisation rather than what the organisation stands for, and in the process often demonizing those it seeks to support. As Emily Willingham comments:

> *It's odd that Wright* [Founder of Autism Speaks] *would argue so strongly for supports given that, according to the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, her own organisation in 2010*

devoted only 4% of its budget to "Family service" grants. And Autism Speaks' track record on inclusion of the very people it claims to represent was limited, at best, and now has returned to nonexistent. (Willingham 2013)

Organisations of such wealth and access to media wield a lot of power in the impression and identity of autism in the public sphere. This was highlighted with an Autism Speaks advertising campaign in 2009, identifying autistic sufferers as missing children who have been abducted by an unseen and ominous threat as scare tactics to engage the community in ending the social epidemic. Indeed it did generate much debate about the disorder and those affected by it with many rejecting the image that had been created. The reactions to this campaign identify a further polarisation of the debate as Claudia Wallis identified:

Few medical conditions rival autism as a magnet for controversy. Practically everything about the disorder — its cause, its treatment, the way it is diagnosed, how it is studied — is subject to bitter dispute, sometimes to the point of death threats.

The most impassioned disagreements are propelled by desperate parents of autistic children, but increasingly, people who themselves have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis are speaking up. And their priorities, surprisingly enough, are not always in line with the advocacy groups who seek to represent their interests. (Wallis 2009)

This interlacing framework of medicine, research, advocacy, treatment and support services is echoed in the local environment in which this research was conducted. This dynamic will be explored further but for the moment it is enough to identify that autism, by its diagnosis, colloquial and media informed identity in the wider community presents challenges to the taken for granted abilities of a professionally trained performer. At best the autistic person is positioned socially as someone who does not comprehend the taken-for-granted and non-verbal social dynamics of any given situation. Certainly this is echoed in the comments from various participants in this research; a feeling that there was something going on around them that they weren't a part of. A little like the feeling you might have had when walking into a room and everyone stops speaking immediately; something is going on, a shared social awareness, but you don't know what it is. It is hard to imagine someone on the spectrum interacting in a workshop based on the physical and psychological demands of contemporary acting techniques devised throughout the twentieth Century and taught in rigorous training institutions designed to probe the deepest psychology and corporeality of a prospective actor. Acting therefore presents both a puzzle

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and a solution in that, as mentioned above, it embodies a multi-faceted awareness of character, plot, environment and audience.

As discussed above, the task of the actor is to explore and embody the corporeal lived experience. Here then is the dilemma of the autistic actor for it would appear that accepted understanding of the autistic experience is distinct from, or at least framed by, the experience of the neurotypical (or normal brain function) person. In terms of the autistic body, the ways in which it is treated are constructed socially, informed by neurology, psychiatry and how the social body is performed in social/cultural exchanges (Ochs 2010, Ortego2013). These influences would appear to make the autistic body distinct from the capacities required of the conventional actor's body in trying to achieve corporeal transcendence as Stanislavsky suggests. With respect to any universal concept of the body socially and how (if attempted) an empirical understanding of it leads to understanding all others, this is subject to debate; questioning any definition of 'correct' social signifying behaviour. In Ortego's book "Corporeality, Medical Technologies and Contemporary Culture" (2013) he explores this schism between epistemological understandings of the body and the limitations that implies about access to the lived experience and ontological understanding; that of the ethnographic and anthropological pursuit. It is this theoretical impasse, which makes understanding both the autistic body and the autistic actor's body as a thing in and of itself that this research seeks to inform. The conclusion of research and creative volume reveal how the social act of a theatrical performance can suspend or transcend this problem by the very nature of its practice. In doing so these ontological and epistemological ideas about the autistic body and the actors body can be re-imagined and how this re-imagining can then be re-transcribed into the everyday frameworks of social exchange.

Hence the academic discourse, be it biomedical or sociological, speaks on behalf of those on the spectrum. Indeed organisations such as Autism Speaks imply in the name that there is agency on behalf of the autistic person to advocate for him or herself. But any advocacy is framed within the terms of a diagnostic explanatory model. These models distinguish the autistic body and these organisations speak on their behalf. The voice of the autistic person and the ability for them to speak of their own corporeal experience is filtered through these frameworks. It is this juncture that sets the scene, so to speak, for SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY; an ensemble of actors, formed as part of a social group under the auspices of an autistic advocacy organisation, using "theatrical techniques, such as improvisational games and perspective training" (Corbett et al 2014) discovered that they can re-imagine the autistic body socially by creating a visceral experience theatrically for an audience. This has lead to more than mere realignment of socially acceptable behaviour. It is work that invokes ideas of

'autistic sociallity' (Ochs 2010) and the active engagement with "the dilemmas related to discourses, identity, subjectivity, intersubjectivity and demarcation of social worlds" (Lawlor 2010). Instead of learning how to behave in a way that is less autistic for the benefit of the broader social environment, the actors in this company have used the form and function of theatre to (re)create the autistic body and its interpretation in the everyday.

Chapter 2 Context and Observations

This research degree is based upon the ethnographic observations of a theatre company comprising ensemble members on the Autistic Spectrum. SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY is a small theatre company based in Beigeville South Australia. Originally formed as a social group for young adults as part of a program by Autism Respect Service (A.R.S.), it has developed into an independent organisation. The fieldwork began in September 2011 and I followed the company for twelve months. In that time I was able to observe the individual actors working collectively on long-term projects through skills based exercises, improvisation and rehearsal. I attended performances and some social events. I was also able to observe how the structures of organisations and funding bodies determine and frame the experience of the ensemble and their opportunities to perform. By the end of my fieldwork, the company became much more independent, and is now pursuing broad artistic goals, however, the frame of support structures that initially formed the group underline the broader social constructs that the group and the individuals involved are subject to.

Company History

The primary organisation for support and advocacy of those on the spectrum and their families in Beigeville where this research was conducted in is Autism Respect Services (A.R.S.). A.R.S. can trace its history as far back as 1964 when parents of children with autism came together to provide support services and diagnosis for the community. This is roughly twenty years after the condition was formally recognised. Since that time the association has evolved into a more corporate service model, which is supported by government, commercial and publicly donated funds. The organisation has offices just outside of the central business district of Beigeville and employs staff across medical diagnosis, treatment and therapy, social inclusion as well as administrative staff. It is a not-for-profit organisation governed by a board with representatives from the client's body (parents), staff and business. Currently A.R.S. gets most of its operating money from State and Federal government allocations. This money is offered on provision of A.R.S. delivering a program of services, which adhere to strict guidelines laid down by the government departments that dispense the funds. Essentially, the government tells the organisation how much money they will be given and how it is to be used. A.R.S. 'applies' for this funding, which details their programs in respect to these guidelines. As such all monies are tightly

regulated and primary attention is given to diagnosis, therapy and social inclusiveness support services. Given this focus, generally the services are available to young children and teenagers or those under guardianship of a legal adult. A common joke amongst the ensemble of SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY was that you are only autistic until you are eighteen years old. At eighteen, an individual is considered a legal adult responsible for their own life and to a lesser degree a product of the therapy they received as a minor with the programs offered by A.R.S. This more cynical and colloquial interpretation as expressed by the ensemble reflects the fact that A.R.S. does not get funded for adult support services. It is this latter view that significantly shaped upheavals in the company's direction and identity during the course of my fieldwork, as I will detail further on.

It was from this organisational structure and its objectives of social integration support services that a new group was formed in 2003. The idea of the group was to create a regular social gathering for those on the spectrum who were interested in plays, drama and movies. It was very informal with the most structured exercise being readings of popular scripts such as the television show 'Fawlty Towers' and Monty Python movies. As time went on participants tired of the lack of structure and so a client/support worker within A.R.S., Mark Hamil, who also happened to be trained actor, was asked to step in to provide some rudimentary acting exercises and workshops. Although these acting exercises could have been regarded as therapy in terms of learning and practicing social skills this, for Mark, was not the primary objective; instead it was more of a bi-product. Mark's approach was to use acting exercises and craft as a means of exploring personal stories and ideas, as a way of participants expressing themselves and their relationship to the world around them. He began by introducing rigid exercises that focused on the embodied tool of the actor; voice, fitness, flexibility and 'theatre games' that stretched the improvisational skills and intuitive responses of the performers. He informed me that it was a bit of a struggle at first to get the ensemble to commit, however by the time I had come along to conduct my fieldwork, these exercises had developed into almost structured rituals for a session that were regarded as normal and necessary to any rehearsal. Indeed there was a sense of pride in the discipline and 'fitness' of the actors.

Gradually the group's numbers grew, as did the ambition to learn more and apply the skills learnt in a performance aspect. Small-scale performances were created, which had success at international seminars and conferences. Everyone involved became excited about the experiences and the potential of the group, which by this name had dropped the original support group title of AAA and adopted the current name, SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY. It is worth observing at this point that the title of AAA – per aspera ad astra, which translates as 'through difficulty to the stars', and embedded within it views

and value judgments about those on the spectrum, and in turn, those involved in the group as well as framing any expectations an audience might have. The ensemble moved quickly to disassociate from this identity and the central idea of representing the ASD voice was cemented within the future work of the ensemble. This was a subtle yet significant shift in the outlook and reflexive view of the ensmle members and would form the root of future activities. A.R.S. was starting to see the opportunities for a public and creative face to the organisation. Academics and researchers became interested in the live presented experiences the ensemble were creating and the ensemble members themselves were emboldened by touring and expressing themselves in a way that people actually listened to them. The ensemble was starting to earn their own grants independently from arts agencies and other streams not traditionally associated with the A.R.S. income stream. These grants were to aid in the development of creative outlets, employing peers from the entertainment industry to conduct workshops in acting, film making and writing. In this sense they were also becoming part of the larger performing arts community in Beigeville, which has a strong history of disability arts organisations creating international work. In a relatively short time the group had seized control of their 'brand' and were operating well beyond the group's initial intention.

It is at about this time, in the middle of 2010, when the company and I met, at a public performance of their latest devised work 'Out of Shot'. This was a thirty-minute play born out of improvised and devised scenarios that the ensemble and Mark had been working on. In many ways it was the result of an almost auto-ethnographic process involving a process of dramatising (both literally and metaphorically) personal accounts of being autistic. By now the company had moved from a laconic social group to a focused and disciplined ensemble with the ambition to grow and develop their work, but also politically charged with the advocacy of people on the spectrum and its place in the community. After the show I met with the then coordinator/producer of the group working on behalf of A.R.S., Isobel Williams. She articulated even then on the dilemma or feelings of uncomfortableness in applying for grants and competing with other disability organisations that were just as marginalised as they were. It was clear that there was a determination and drive to extend beyond the structures of A.R.S. and branch out as independent artists. The individuals in the company and their supporters could see the many layered responses to the work they were creating including personal development, self-confidence and probably more significantly, a sense of agency, a voice that they owned; for once they were not being spoken about or spoken to. Instead, they were the ones doing the speaking and audiences were forced to listen. I had met the company on the crest of a wave as it were and this backdrop was to develop over the course of my fieldwork, setting the scene for future work and the artists involved.

Space/Structure/Time

My first visit to the field was at the beginning of September 2010. The company met regularly at 6.30pm for a 6.45pm start at a converted church, now a community centre, in the western suburbs of Beigeville. Upon my arrival the previous group, for younger people with autism, were finishing up their session and packing up to head home. A young autistic girl of about fourteen or fifteen years old greeted me and proceeded to offer me some small toiletries to buy. This was for no purpose such as raising money for charity and Mark (the Artistic Director who conducts the workshops) indicated that I did not have to feel obliged to purchase anything. Even so I bought the bar of soap from her and gave her $2, which was all I had on me at the time. The soap had a sticker on it asking for $10 but she seemed happy with the $2. To be honest at this point, I had not many exchanges with people on the spectrum, or did but just did not realise it. Was this normal; to be expected? It did seem like behaviour to be expected though and I engaged in the interaction with the view that, for her, this was an extension of friendship, or at least an introduction from this young girl; her version of a handshake. As we waited for the members of the ensemble to arrive I caught up with Mark about recent changes of staff at A.R.S. He indicated that there were many people leaving due to dissatisfaction with the organisation and that it now meant there was no one representing or fighting for the company on any management panel within A.R.S. This was a discussion that was obviously not meant for this time and place and we agree to catch up on the details later. However these two brief exchanges encapsulate some of the conclusions of my experience with SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY; people identified as needing support, trying to express themselves within an organisation that sees them as 'clients' and is also is involved in a competitive non-profit, corporate advocacy, and yet business world.

This complex backdrop creates an abstract space within which the ensemble members and the company itself live. There are of course the added personal and professional lives of the members as well. The ensemble members are, like anyone, individuals who engage in multiple social environments, frameworks and structures away from this group including education, employment, religious communities as well as friends and family. These other identities, or 'masks' as anthropology might understand them, represent the day to day struggles of objectification, abuse and marginalisation. Some of these backgrounds include school bullying and social isolation (of children with parents and of parents by their friends), which is crystalised in the background of one informant who was told that they were a curse on the family as punishment for indiscretions made by their parents. It must also be countered that these backgrounds also include strong familial bonds, love, support and acceptance in schooling and employment environments. As with any life, there is a mixture of the positive and the

negative; in the case of these informants however, the lens of autism is not a socially or medically consistent one and the distortion of it is in the eye of the beholder. Each of the members had a strong sense of identity with their autism and generally embraced it as a positive thing with any 'problems' residing in others. Nonetheless, SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY functioned as a social haven from the buffering of these other life-masks. Informants regularly commented throughout the fieldwork that they had found a place where they felt they truly belonged and could 'be themselves'. The ensemble represented a safety net, to have one's autism and its particular manifestations accepted without bias. Within this physical space at this time every week, they had carved out a 'space', a social parallel universe so to speak, within which they could explore ways, means and stories they could tell in their own voice. As one informant said "It helps me to understand autism". This suspending of everyday social norms and creating a new collective identity, which could communicate autonomously via the forms and structure of performance, proved to be the basis of the findings in this research.

This space in which craft is explored and work created can be seen in both a physical and abstract sense. Physically the space that the ensemble uses is an old church, which has been converted into a multi-purpose community centre. As a space, it does not evoke the character of any one resident but a shared space by groups of people with varying social isolation issues (substance abuse, disability of various natures, (un)employment, retirement, domestic violence and so forth). There are magazine racks offering many brochures about employment and study opportunities, rights and obligations as well as posters for community events and other activities. The kitchen and computer room are littered with signs reminding users of the obligation to maintain the facilities for the use of all the various social groups who frequent the venue. A calendar of when each group has exclusive access throughout the month is also prominently displayed on the wall for users and hirers. The hall is a large cavernous space with the architecture and the still visible altar dominating the environment. However it has been furnished and decorated in a neutral manner and any religious affiliations are long since gone. But the idea of a community-meeting place within the walls of religious structures does echo that collective community spirit which is often associated with the church. Now though, it is a shared secular.

By way of effectively 'owning' the space, the ensemble lounge on the couches provided, and assume chairs and spaces that have become accepted as 'that persons' space' as they gather for the evening's work. In these nooks they converse about the events of the week, read (comics generally) or play games; most common is the card game based on the Manga animation, 'Yu Gi Oh!'. Eventually Mark calls the ensemble into the centre of the space for what became known to me as 'circle time'. Everyone stands together in a small circle and listens to news about the happenings of the company for the week

and the plan for the evening's workshop. This is followed by warm up exercises that, although varied slightly from week to week, structured a disciplined focus on body and voice. Regardless of the variance between members in the actual doing of the exercise that had been set, it was obvious that this collective time and focus was a separation process, a means to leave the world of the everyday behind and 'get in the zone' as it were with the work that they were about to embark on. Following the warm up exercises, traditionally a theatre sports game was played, sometimes at Mark's request (if he was working on a specific aspect of performance for example) and sometimes at the request of an ensemble member. The games are fun and are used for getting into a mind state of work and at the end of a session as a way of winding down that focus, and even sometimes as a reward for good work or a release from tension within the workspace. Following the games and warm up the group gets into the body of work set for the session. This usually includes rehearsing an established scene or scenes or developing new work, which had been written by Mark throughout the week based on the discoveries from the previous week's session. This goes for about an hour of the total two hours that the group meet for each week.

A basic format for each session then is as follows;
1. ensemble members gather
2. 'circle time'
3. warm up exercises
4. one or two theatre games
5. session proper (scene work, exploration on a theme for the night, rehearsal)
6. one or two theatre games
7. 'circle time'
8. ensemble disbands for the session

There is a physical and social framework here that allows for a communal experience unique to this small group. The designated and regular time allocated to the group in the space creates a physical environment for the group to meet for those two hours each week, independent from the day-to-day identities beyond the closed door that leads outside. It is literally written (albeit on the communal whiteboard) that this time in this space is reserved for this group doing their thing. Once in the space the group performs the regular activities of the warm up and moves onto share experiences and ideas about the work for the evening in the session proper; be that emotional, intellectual, moral and ethical. As a group dedicated to self-expression of the lived experience of autism, the body of the session, the rehearsal, explores many of these everyday structures in their lives during this time and within this

space. All manner of emotions and thoughts are explored and challenged, and the problem solving of communicating these effectively through drama are explored. At the conclusion of this work there is a process by which the members 'come out of that space' as it were, performing a reversal of activities present at the beginning of the session before they literally walk out of the building again and the venue is left available for the next group. The form and structure of the traditionally understood theatre experience are already present within the form and structure of the weekly company meeting; time and space delineated from the every day, a collective moment shared and then a return to that everyday existence.

On this first night of fieldwork there were 6 out of the usual 12 ensemble members present; Edward, Dick, Tahlia, Silas, Carlos and Craig. As well there is support worker Carol, who is not autistic but volunteers for the group as part of her research in movement therapy and as a protocol determined by A.R.S. when working with clients. The night's exercise was an extension of what was introduced the previous week. Mark had introduced the group to the fundamental aspects of the Stanislavsky acting method. This week he was conducting a self-devised scene work exercise that practiced these principles. The ensemble was split up into 2 groups of three and asked to create a scenario with each of the actors using elements of the acting method.

The exercise involved the following…
• 	Create a scene that could be real life where there is conflict
• 	1 person uses 'soft' or 'yielding' activities to get what they want
• 	1 person uses 'contending' or strong activities
• 	1 person uses a combination of the two.
• 	The scene must have a beginning, middle and conclusion that is reached.

In this one exercise can be seen the two guiding principles of most performing; structure and intuition. The exercise obviously has a set of instructions that inform the journey of characters but it does not prescribe the outcome. Likewise, the characters are based within defined characteristics as understood by the Stanislavsky heritage but again the outcome is open; open to success, failure or even change in the character. These unknown outcomes are the direct result of intuitive improvisation within the structure of the exercise. In short the imagined boundary defined by the instructions only allows space for discovery, it does not predetermine the outcome. The reason for this is based in the everyday call and response mechanism of conversation and interaction. Listening to what is being offered and responding to it. At its essence then, it is about a response first and an action second. These

responses, in order for them to be intuitive and thereby 'real', are only really successful when the performers are reacting in the moment, as they perceive the lived experiences of the scenario. In this sense it can be understood they are replicating everyday exchanges, whereby you don't know what is going to be said next and therefore react, consider and then respond in turn. This is where it can be said that the practices are a kind of training/therapy for everyday life.

However, this is where the therapy description ends because what follows takes it further away from the everyday and more towards something else. Upon the completion of the exercise there follows a period of reflection and analysis with the entire ensemble. Mark will often comment on aspects of the scene that were successful in terms of a performance for an audience and adjust stage placement or activity accordingly. This is also done to adjust the emotional tempo or journey of the scene. During this time there is also comment from other members of the ensemble. More often than not though these observations were also about the technical specifics of the scene. This was often an intellectual conversation about the structure, timing or stage blocking of the scene; emotional analysis of the journey or experience by the audience was not discussed, although everyone acknowledged the success or failure to capture/recreate/perform emotional responses appropriately.

Mark:	"How did that feel?"
Simon:	a bit foul "some of the characters had a bit of a bad attitude"
Tahlia:	"I definitely prefer it when we got told what to say"

Carlos:	– "It didn't sound like that to me"
Simon:	- "It doesn't sound right"
Mark:	- "Tone is important for trying to get connection behind the line"

Overall, these discussions are seeking to understand how an audience might feel during the performance and there is a common language of imagination amongst the actors. Indeed there is no indication at all from Mark or the others that there is compensation for the assumed difficulties understanding these concepts that traditionally come with ASD, although sometimes this was also the cause of the most conventionally autistic discussions. One or two informants particularly would always question the use of profane language and despite the best efforts of Mark to justify its use, the conversation often resembled a text-book analysis of repetitive speech patterns and inability to 'let go' of a conversation or idea. Despite the shared understanding between the group, that this was a place

where you could 'be yourself', these issues sometimes became obstacles to the others who did not have a problem from moving on to more work, and frustrations with other's 'autistic-ness' became evident.

Over the course of the next twelve months of fieldwork, the format for meetings and rehearsals followed essentially the same script. The specifics of games, work, content and to a lesser extent time and location followed this regular pattern. But as with all theatre, it must be performed to an audience and the universe of unseen structures and frameworks that gave the ensemble identity was also responsible for facilitating these opportunities. These realities were brought into stark focus during my fieldwork and became the catalyst for some of the most emotional outbursts of the fieldwork establishing determination and lingering passion for the work to continue.

Politics of creating within structure: Institutional Abandonment

About six months into the fieldwork the ensemble were working towards a public fundraiser event. The objective was to create a public profile of the company and to raise funds for a future season anticipated in the local Arts Festival; an annual open-access arts festival held in February/March each year. The event was to be a screening of digital stories, which were created by the ensemble members as part of a grant-sponsored workshop program with the Film Resource Centre. There was also going to be short live performances of some of the scenes that had been written and rehearsed and would form part of the final play. The idea for the group to start sourcing its own funds was in part instigated by the management committee of the company, which was administered by representatives of the umbrella organization A.R.S. Their motives for this event were based on the fact that the activities of the ensemble were becoming less aligned to the core services that A.R.S. provided. As such the ensemble had to take more responsibility for their financial survival independent of the parent organisation. I had been to several management meetings by this time, which can be generally summarised as a polite but fervent exchange between passionate artists (both Mark and previous guest artists who had worked with the company) and the administrative middle management of a large organisation. These were well meaning and polite people but it was clear that the ensemble's activities and ambition was not their main focus and I always sensed the language of these bureaucrats laying the groundwork for future abandonment. One administrator putting it very bluntly that any activities A.R.S. engaged in had to be in line with strategic plan of the organisation and that SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY was competing for the time and resources of priority programs. Although in the planning for many months, it was

becoming clear that this project was likely to suffer administrative dumping just weeks out from the event. A few weeks later this proved to be the case.

Mark had also seen this outcome eventuating and had begun negotiations with another performing arts company that worked with people with a broad range of disabilities. So on the night that the two representatives from A.R.S. turned up at the weekly company rehearsal was not unexpected; he had been told in advance that they would be coming to talk to the group. The details of what happened could best be characterised as tense and patrionising. The lead representative from A.R.S. began by heaping praise onto the efforts of the group to date, at one point even saying "they were all stars" and handing out chocolate. Tension amongst the group was sparked immediately by these gestures; being spoken down to like this and offered bribes like a child rankled them visibly with stimming (a highly agitated repetitive movement generally coupled with a heightened emotional state) amongst some. Their message to the group was that both the fundraising event and festival performance season were to be abandoned and would not be re-mounted in the future; citing economic rationale and an acknowledgement that the company were at odds with the objectives of the organisation. The outcome was predictable, feelings of anger and betrayal. The representatives did not stay for much longer than thirty minutes having announced the decision about cancelling the event and taking questions. The questions and reactions that followed demonstrate the schism that had occurred in the self-determination of the group;

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> Edward: "we did it for nothing?"
> Silas: "we did it for ourselves mate"
> Edward: "legal bullshit"

As a current employee of A.R.S., Mark was in a unique situation. He represented both the ensemble and the organisation. It was a position that compromised his position as an advocate for either party. The mood amongst the ensemble members was somber and talk, despite being couched in resentment and dissatisfaction, was also energized, agitated and political. There was talk of determination to disaffiliate SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY as a group from A.R.S. control and find an avenue of independence. Over the previous few weeks, as this issue was building, there had been many casual meetings and conversations with parents, fellow artists and supporters in working towards a split with A.R.S. and finding a means to have more creative independence. Mark now revealed these discussions to gauge support and he found it warmly embraced amongst both the ensemble members and their parents and supporters who were also present.

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This was obviously a significant moment in the course of fieldwork and the group as a whole. It also identifies two key findings in this research. Firstly it validates the presence of social structures, which both support and define these people as autistic in a broad community sense. A.R.S. is an advocacy and support based organisation. It provides a social network for clients and their carers as well as diagnosis and behavioural therapy. With respect to SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY, they provided an administrative framework and a communication network to the broader autism community. However, their funding model and their support focus is intertwined and reflective of each other, and subsequently because there is the focus on early development and therapy, while adult programs are not properly supported. This was emphasised by Tahlia when she made the observation;

> Leanne: "you're only on the spectrum until your eighteen, then you're cured"

Secondly, by removing this framework it exposed the group to an absence of social place and space within which they could autonomously identify and express themselves. The ties that bind this group are, from this point on, ideological only. The unseen scaffold of the group's identity was being dismantled and the feelings of anger, frustration, and betrayal formed a cumulative experience of abandonment and no support. For most people this would create a sense of anxiety and for those on the spectrum, particularly those of the group who are soothed by stability, this moment represented a significant upheaval and stress in their lives.

Eventually this breach consolidated the ensemble's determination to create theatre that told stories from the autistic experience. Theatre would give these actors the opportunity to have an audience sit down and listen to them instead of talk at them. Over the following weeks and months, Mark negotiated a formal separation from A.R.S. after finding a place within the larger disability arts organisation he had developed a relationship with. Supporters of the group, including parents, were rallied and there was a flurry of activity with a company fundraiser 'Quiz Night', a performance at a university sponsored conference, new corporate identity and new ensemble members. SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY had successfully carved another space within which to create their work and 'speak' autonomously through it.

I could write at length about the intricacies of these moments of fieldwork, I must however wrangle and focus on these events within the scope of the findings here; that the process of making theatre is to carve space and time out of the everyday in order to suspend the conventional structures of a

community. The value of understanding this is evident in the responses to performance where it can be seen that by suspending these everyday relationships, identity and meaning can be redefined. So I will move on to observations of the actual performances that highlight this ability, its impact on the actors and their audiences.

Performances

A conference being held at a local university was the first opportunity I had of seeing the company publicly perform since that first encounter pre-fieldwork. Gathered were academics and researchers across many disciplines all working in the area of autism and other mental disabilities from diagnosis to therapy, education and integration programs. As part of the program of events an opening night gala performance was held for delegates. Performing at this event were many disabled arts organisations including choirs and musicians as well as the expected keynote speakers. For the ensemble of SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY, this was a night of firsts. It was the first time the group had performed together since the upheaval with A.R.S. and it was also the first time they were to perform new scenes they had been working on for the past few months. There were two scenes to be performed as well as a screening of some of the digital stories from a previous workshop program. The scene entitled 'model comparison' was a parody of a famous advertising campaign by computer manufacturer APPLE. In this case the comparison was between a neuro-typical person and the spectrum of autism as defined by the levels of diagnosis from aspergers syndrome to PDDNOS (personality development disorder not otherwise specified). It is a comic piece, which received raucous laughter from the audience and a huge round of applause at the end. However, it was the performance of an essentially domestic scenario that elicited the most interesting response.

The scene itself was about the daily trials of a family preparing for the day at breakfast. A mother, father, daughter and two brothers (one of whom is autistic) forms the family unit set in the 1970s. The mother is cast in a typical gendered division of labour role, preparing meals and attending to the emotional needs of her children. The father assumes a patriarch role, failing to help except for orders and postulations about the behaviour and self-discipline of his children who fight and bicker with each other. The scene climaxes when the autistic son appears at the table and engages in typical stimming behaviour, which aggravates the narcissistic sister. The aggression between the sister and neuro-typical brother (who is defending his autistic brother) escalates with the sister storming out abusing her family and blaming her 'retarded' brother for making her life a misery. The mealtime encounter ends in disarray with the sister walking out, the autistic son locking himself in his room having a recognizable autistic meltdown and the father vindicated that his position is sound whilst revealing in a private moment

onstage that he too has autistic stimming behaviour which shows itself under stress. It is also a scene about the lack of medical knowledge and support for families in this particular decade. Other scenes would be written in the future replaying this scenario in different decades to show the changing stresses and tensions on the family unit. The scene received hearty applause, not as hearty as the model comparison scene but enthusiastic nonetheless. It was not until weeks later that I discovered just how profound the impact was of this scene and why.

After a function with the company to celebrate the recent performance and the end of my official fieldwork time with the group, I caught a ride home with Jane, the mother of ensemble member Tahlia and a pivotal figure in the newly established support network of the company in the wake of the A.R.S. abandonment. Our discussions ranged across critique of the show, influences in acting and advocacy. At one point Jane revealed that her husband, Tahlia's father, really connected with the breakfast domestic scene "because that's what it's really like"; a reflection of 'real life' imagined theatrically. Because of this 'reality' he had commented that he had learned more about the experience of autism from that scene than he had in a long time and that it had helped him, for the first time, to really understand what life must be like for his autistic daughter. This was obviously significant for both Jane and Tahlia. Here was a man that had raised an autistic daughter, had been familiar with the medicine, science, social impact and all range of life adjustments that were made because of his daughter. He had lived this scenario countless times over many years but had never observed it. For him there was still a gap in his understanding of the lived experience of the others in his family. In short he saw himself onstage and because he could recognise that reflection, the performance resonated more deeply. It also opened up the opportunity to see and understand the lived experience of other people reflected in the performance. He recognised the tension between husband and wife, he saw arguments played out between the children as re-tellings of his experiences. Specifically though he was not a part of the conversation, he was an observer, an audience member required to do nothing more than watch and listen. The conventions of theatre performance do not invite call and response from the audience in conversation. They are simply asked to sit quietly and listen, watching the reflections of themselves on stage. As well, the audience member adjusts to their environment, processing the multi-sensory experience of being present in a room of fellow audience members and actors performing. It was this unique assemblage of time, space and presence that suspended the everyday modes of perceiving the lived experience and in doing so allowed for an internal reflection on the part of Tahlia's father. And upon that reflection he was able to understand or at least analyse in more depth the nature of his experience and place amongst the world and the relationships in it. In this ephemeral/existential moment, lived or at least nested within the everyday, he came to understand the 'other'.

As an addendum to this review of the performance, Jane mentioned that her husband did not like the model comparison sketch as it satirized the position of the neurotypical person and gave them lower status. Incredibly, he was effectively rejecting the idea that was presented about autistic people, by autistic people. According to Jane and Tahlia this was as a reaction to how the neurotypical was represented; as a Luddite bound by social conventions with little free will. Needless to say Jane and Tahlia's response to this was "so what, get over it", as if to say 'now you know what it's like'. Here then was validation of the other key finding in this research: that autistic actors, by the mechanism and the format of a theatre performance, could claim a position of status, which had the impact of lowering the value of self worth in others; a position that the ensemble actors felt on a regular basis in their everyday lives. It is indicative also that the power of communication onstage is not determined by the assumed abilities of an actor to communicate the subtle, nonverbal texts and indicated semiotics of everyday life, but to accurately create a metaphorical reflection of that life within the formalised environment of the actor-audience status relationship, which in turn creates shared meaning.

Key findings on conveying fieldwork

As I look back on my fieldwork notes I find it almost impossible to find any descriptions written down which is a clear illustration of the autistic actor. If you didn't know they were autistic then you certainly wouldn't be able to tell from the scrawled observations alone. Watching the group I was obviously aware of the limited knowledge and experience of technique and stagecraft of the actors. Autistic characteristics of any one actor would be indicative of any diagnosis. However the work conducted, the meaning of that work to these actors' lives and the effect of communicating meaning to an audience is indicative of many ensembles. I observed actors 'pretending' to be other people for whom they had little to draw on, or what was drawn on was filtered through their specific autism lens.

During fieldwork, two specific instances that signaled this breach in the conventional understanding of the inability of autistic people to project empathy. The first of these was during a warm up exercise at the beginning of a rehearsal one evening. The game was called 'I Wish' which involved one-person stating to the rest of the group a wish that the rest of the group has to act out. In this particular case an actor called out that they wished everyone were neurotypical. What followed was several of the actors walking around the space pretending to be upper class sophisticated socialites speaking in the tones of a well-bred private school English person whilst discussing common, working class subjects at a cocktail event; little fingers raised while drinking and noses in the air.

Actor 1:   would you like a beer?

Actor 2:   why certainly. Shall we sit and watch some football?

The second significant observation (and probably my favourite) was during an early development rehearsal of a scene at a doctor's surgery. The scene was meant to replicate the waiting room where a doctor (in this case Leo Kanner) wandered around interviewing children from about five years to 12 years old. So to be clear, the actors were being asked to be autistic children in the scene, something for which they should have vast amounts of emotional memory (as Stanislavsky would put it) to draw on. However both actors presented characters that were almost caricature, retarded or mentally disabled. To me as an observer, these were not autistic children being represented. This was fascinating - autistic actors pretending to be autistic and yet offering up performances that were so far removed from their own behaviour. Was this because it is difficult to play yourself? You should not really have to pretend, surely: just be onstage and the effect is created. I spoke with one of the actors afterwards and inquired about this. His response was that he drew on an image of a co-worker at his place of employment. Apparently that person was a "real retard and not right". So here was an actor who recognised that autistic behaviour is different, distinct from everyday normal behaviour. He identified someone in his life that represented this behavioural anomaly and re-created his actions onstage to signify this. So here at least in these two examples it can be observed that the process of identifying an 'other' and representing them via actions and indications of behaviour is an activity that is both actively engaged in and performed by an autistic actor. The success of an effective representation is a subjective, one but it cannot be denied that a level of imagination and interpretation existed in creating these characters and in this sense the assumption that autistic people cannot imagine another is void. It also shows that a level of interpretation has been engaged in with the interpretations presented of the other. Again this is the objective of an actor; to interpret from page to stage the abstract ideas embedded in a script or exercise's instructions, and so the idea of neurotypical actors as the only bearers of these skill is also rejected.

A final example was that of an improvised scene where two actors had to 'top' the insults being hurled at them by the other in a kind of verbal tennis match. At one point one of the actors delivered a particularly personal attack on the other. The room fell silent and Mark quickly abandoned the scene. Almost immediately, the actor who had delivered the insult apologised to the other saying "you know I was only acting". The other actor acknowledged this was the case and seemed to not be affected, instead carrying on with the next exercise. This demonstrates the ability not only to pretend, but to empathise and understand when performance may cross the line to reality.

Were these representations a lived experience; a complete transformation of physicality, corporeal existence, emotional sensitivity and mental acuity? It is hard to say, but what can be said is that the actors in all these examples were present during the scene; they were living in the reality of the moment, and it is this process and outcome that is recognisable as the 'act' of acting. For someone on the spectrum, for whom it is assumed that these abilities are at best compromised, this was an act that is taken for granted by actors of all persuasions universally. This is and of itself a challenge for both the presuppositions about the neurotypical (and by definition typical) actor and the assumed abilities of the autistic person to engage with behaviour that is thought to be beyond their capacities. It is these observations that have led me to conclude that the act of acting on stage is not the exclusive sphere of an actor that understands the nuances of everyday, non-verbal semiotics. Nor is it unattainable to people who are restricted in their everyday ability to perceive these day-to-day encounters. Instead, the framing out of everyday behaviour by way of the stage and audience relationships as constructed in a performance of theatrical sense, gives way to broader understanding of the 'other' being performed. This suspension of everyday relationships and assumptions creates a space for seeing, reflecting and redefining this everyday meaning. The masks of conventional characters, defined by unwritten social structures which frame an individual's identity, can be removed, placed on hold and suspended in the space and time of a specific performance, be that a rehearsal or a public showing. This is because the position of people in a theatrical event restructures the everyday relationships. The audience must sit in defined spaces and are not permitted to move. The actors however, can move freely around the stage or within the entire theatre. The audience is not permitted to respond to action or dialogue; they cannot answer back or physically intervene. The actors however can address the audience directly if they choose, or ignore them completely. The audience, in effect, is completely at the behest of the actors and the performance, they can do nothing except watch from a position of lower status (in respect to an authority to contribute). And yet the audience is the sole focus of intention for an actor and a performance. Everything that is done during a performance is for the purpose and benefit of those who watch it. It is this status relationship that allows for the actors of SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY to speak without being interrupted and in turn to reflect and re-imagine who they are and how they wish to be seen when the suspended structures of a performance are over and the everyday resumes.

Chapter 3 The Empiricism of Performance

We come here to the limits of social science. To understand in depth and detail what transpires within our relations to others, we draw upon the work of social scientists, psychologists, and ethologists to be sure, but it is to the work of artists, novelists, biographers, and nonspecialists that we must also turn for techniques that help us do greatest justice to lived experience. In venturing beyond the borders of orthodox science, we may be accused of departing from empirical truth and being unprofessional, or, worse, of pure invention. But there may be a middle ground, where anecdote enriches rather than invalidates our work. (Jackson 2012:17)

To speak appropriately

Lived experience is complex to unpick and regard in any structural sense. Individual perception is framed upon structures that shape meaning. When meeting strangers, especially ones who you might consider having a better social or economic status, one generally adopts a more formal code of conduct based on these dynamics. This is probably as it should be in many examples. You do not want your doctor to deliver serious medical information with ambiguity and metaphor; likewise close friends don't talk in legalese and convoluted political correctness. There is a natural separation of poetic and empirical speech patterns depending on the discourse being engaged in - they belong in different situations. The actors involved base the rules for language in these situations, like so many social exchanges, on often unspoken negotiated terms of reference; identity, status, public or private, friend, acquaintance, customer, colleague. The emotional and social proximity of the relationship between speakers is critical in the use of conferring to others anything honest, important or specific (Fabb 2010, Schröder 2010, Brown & Levinson 1987). As this proximity becomes more distant, so too does the formality of the language become more obvious.

These are ideas that occur to most of us on an everyday basis, sometimes we might be more engaged with formalised speech patterns and sometimes the 'autopilot' switches on and we assume appropriately relaxed behaviour. These characters or masks are an analogy of the multi-faceted concept of intersubjectivity, a concept explored in various ways by numerous anthropologists including Duranti (2010), Desjarlais (2011), Jackson (2012) and many, many others. Indeed exploring this concept and its underlying structures forms an essential study of social anthropology. In a world divided between the empiricist and the romantic, it is a taken for granted assumption that the empiricist version

is devoid of emotional interpretation or context through the mind of the author. Romanticism on the other hand, is held to be akin to rhetorical speech and therefore a subjective and emotive discourse aimed at by-passing as it were, the logical reasoning attributed to the scientific method (Jones 2008). So to communicate the lived experience of another, regardless of methodological background, becomes an almost impossible task of objective scientific rationale interwoven with cultural bias and subjective observation distilled into a finite form, be it a thesis, ethnography or indeed any publication.

When thinking of the abstract and often foreign social landscapes that anthropologists investigate and then report on, the empirical mind will naturally tend to question the essential knowledge of materialism that the scientific method holds as a truth. This position is crystallized thus; *"Anthropological knowledge is interpretive and hermeneutic rather than positive, tentative rather than conclusive, relative to time, place, and author rather than universal."* (Carrithers et al, 1990:263). Carrithers argues that anthropology, because of its relationship to subjective experience and objective observation, cannot purport to hold any empirical truth, indeed that all science is measured dependent on its *"perceptual consensibility"* (ibid: 266). Arguing for the validation of the persuasive characteristics and *"interpretive nature"* (ibid: 264), he claims to speak on behalf of Geertz himself when arguing for a special place of interpretation with regard to empirical research of cultural behaviours. The exchange in this article is witness to the shifting grounds of empiricism that social scientists struggle to deal with even amongst themselves. The article itself is the embodiment of the constant friction between the empirical, materialistic objectives of the scientific method and public knowledge with the hermeneutic, subjective, aesthetic and culturally positioned observer and reporter of the anthropologist and the data collected.

So an anthropologist enters the field and learns how social interaction is performed based on and lubricated by the subtle shifts in contextual surrounds. It's hard to pin down exactly what and how accepted behaviour and relationships manifest but slowly they begin to figure it out. Using ethnography, survey, interview, data collection, media recordings and reflection a picture is constructed. The anthropologist spends time with the group and slowly begins to acquire a lived experience that they can understand and negotiated with at a 'local' level. Using the concepts and theoretical tools of the anthropologist's discipline they build a map of culture which identifies space, place and the mechanics of social interaction. They can in turn recognise cases such as individuals who are not behaving according to social rules of engagement (taboo, sacred and profane and so on) and can understand these events at a deeper level of context. In such an example it is this fracture of everyday taken-for-granted behaviours, this 'habitus', that the social majority recognise and understand when an individual

becomes an 'other' because of their transgressing of social behavioural rules. For the purposes of this work, Nash's description of habitus is perfect;

> *Habitus is recognised as an embodi-ment of structure, a conception that enables Bourdieu to transcend the dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism, in that it provides people with a sense of the 'feel for the game'. Habitus also provides the grounds for agency, within a limited arena of choice, and thus a theoretical escape from structuralist determinism.* (Nash 1999: 176)

Hence social categories, classes, divisions of labour and social status are isolated. Sub-cultures and formalised behaviour patterns emerge and the hermeneutic existence of function and social structure continues to (r)evolve. Now, in terms of the matter of this research I highlight this convention as a way of everyday identification and dealings with the other people you interact with daily. This is a delicate balance of language, gesture, tone and inflection that are learned and subsumed as a corporeal experience. Which brings me back then to my opening observation; that specific social situations and the context of various social positions within them determine and dictate the everyday rules, diplomacy and performance of the actors engaged in them. This is the subject of exploration for anthropology but it is also the lived experience of the people we research, albeit unexplored often from the participants or informant's point of view. Anthropologists and the people we research alike understand that there are social codes of conduct that exist and we identify those who are different or not normal - the 'other' - by the way they do not adhere to these rules.

Autism spectrum disorder is many things but for the purposes of my inquiry it can be said that it is first identified by the consistent lack or schism in expected social skills. It is enough to say that the everyday perception of autism is of people with high intelligence, emotional detachment and inappropriate behavior in social environments. As detailed above, signifiers include transgressions of social norms including screaming children in public spaces, anti-social behaviour, rudeness, dislike of physical contact and an almost condescending intelligence. The medicalisation of autism has slowly permeated representation in broader cultural dialogue and as such is subject to politically correct terms of reference. Contemporary culture and media engages with this language thereby continuing to realign meaning and ownership of identity as with characters in major motion pictures and television including 'Rain Man' (Levinson 1988), 'Temple Grandin' (Jackson 2010), 'The Big Bang Theory' (Warner 2012), 'Autism: The Musical' (Regan 2007) and the Louis Theroux documentary 'Extreme Love: Autism' (Pickup 2012). Cultural awareness of autism is so broad now that fictional characters are identified and accepted as being on the spectrum (Magro n.d., Sepinwall 2009) as well as historical ones as cited by

Oliver Sacks (Sacks 1995). Colloquially informants in this research referred to the classic dramatic characters of the 'mad scientist' or 'absent-minded professor' as one of their own. Identified as a medical condition less than one hundred years ago, autism is the subject of much formal psychiatric, genetic and therapeutic discourse. However, in general, autism, as noted in chapter 1, is identified clinically and socially, and recognised culturally.

Autistic people are not only recognised in cultural representations, they are also considered to be members of that creative community. Clinical observers and analysts such as Chrisopher Gillberg go as far as suggesting that asperger type people are particularly creative (Frith 1991). Whether or not the claims made about historical figures such as Mozart, Einstein and many others are true or not (and they are almost impossible to determine now as they died long before autism was a diagnosable condition), the commonality between them all is that they approached their discipline with unique intelligence and creativity. So, when considering Autism with regard to performance, and acting it can be argued that the unique world-view of the autistic person is both the subject and the progenitor of creative expression.

This particular focus creates a space to explore the difference between performing socially and performing theatrically. On the outset, the features of both would seem incompatible. In fact the everyday clues that help identify someone as potentially being on the spectrum are counter to the perceived skills of an actor. Acting techniques and exercises are used as a means of therapy and training those on the spectrum in everyday social communications skills (Chasen 2011, Nelson 2010, Schneider 2006). There are subsequently many who advocate that the skills and techniques of acting for the stage are commensurate with developing skills in the non-verbal social language. This function of actor training is a reasonable assumption given that autistic people are, as I have mentioned, considered uniquely creative in their interpretations of the world around them. It also makes sense if we consider acting as a reflection of social behaviour in the everyday encounters between people. Acting schools and techniques have broken down to a process the way in which people can communicate verbally, non-verbally and symbolically in a prescribed fashion. However, as Zarrilli identifies, the internal world of the actor during a performance is a recessed corporeal experience, living beneath/behind the corporeal experience of the character they are pretending to be (Zarrilli 2004; 2008). Likewise, that during performance there is a mutual awareness of these two simultaneous states and a very real interaction between them (ibid, 2004) as they navigate the perceptions of the moment. By extension then the recessed experience, that everyday actor and person who is not the character saying the lines onstage, is a neurotypical and average person. The question needs to be asked then, can we access that identity if it is an autistic one, an identity in everyday life that is constantly removed

from the neurotypical experience, subject to the features of social communication inhibitions that come with autism.

Autism is both structured and structures the social position of those on the spectrum, and until an individual is identified/diagnosed with the disorder, they are seen, or at least their behaviour is interpreted, as socially abnormal. This is in part because they fail to act appropriately in social performance situations and behaviour according to unwritten rules of behaviour in public spaces. Acting, as practiced by conventional theatre, is often assumed to be a skill, which mimics social behaviour/performance and plays with the interpretations of it via narrative and presentation. The everyday understanding of people on the spectrum and people who act for entertainment is at opposite ends of the spectrum of the skills for social communication. But if, as Rozik suggests, the basic assumption of theatre is a fictional world created out of "images imprinted on matter, usually similar to that of their models and mediated by language" (Rozik 2010) then it follows that a play, or any artistic expression, can be created based upon the unique models and language of the autistic experience. Certainly this seems to be the position advocated by practitioners of acting in therapeutic environments (Park 2008, Rogers et al 2003) in response to autistic sociality (Ochs 2010). In essence then, the idea of a creative or conventionally abstract way of interpreting the world and expressing oneself within it is actually synchronistic between autism and performance. In fact, the daily terms of reference of an autistic person's label and it's meaning, although based in conventional frameworks, could be reinterpreted within a theatrical frame.

> *Individuals with autism have impairments in their social development and social understanding, and find relating to people extremely difficult. This means that people with autism have difficulty understanding and predicting what other people's actions and comments may mean. The communication impairment in autism is very complex, and affects the whole communication system. This includes the understanding and use of speech and non-verbal modes of communication such as eye contact and gesture. They also have difficulties understanding and using non-verbal communication, such as facial expression, gesture, and body language.* (A.R.S. website, 2013)

The above is subsequently an example of deeply embedded normative cultural codes of conduct projected as a means of identifying autism. Based on medical and psychiatric diagnosis, advocated by state governed agencies promoting therapies practiced by autistic people, it is both a layered definition and projected construction of the autistic person, their behaviour and a means to normalise them. This

web of social and scientific frameworks has been embraced by the members of the company and serves as a shared point of understanding with their audience to reflexively explore through their work.

The work of acting

My background is as an actor, director and producer across theatre, television and film for the last twenty years. I have trained in the malmgrem/psychological acting technique commonly known as 'Laban' (derived from the choreographer Rudolph Laban) at a tertiary level achieving an Associate Diploma in Arts (acting). I have owned and operated a performance in schools dance company and regularly work in a teacher/tutor capacity with youth theatre companies, tertiary institutions and community projects. In all of these capacities I have known a traditional idea of acting and have passed on the teachings of acting teachers before me re-interpreting and remaking the idea of an actor in new generations of actors. The essence of this background is as Bauman observes "Performance ... provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes… studying performance can open up a wider range of vantage points on how language can be structured and what roles it can play in social life" (Baumann 1990). Theatre director, Peter Brook proposes that this form and function can lead to the epitome of a theatrical experience, 'the happening' or cathartic, transformative moment between audience and performer; group and individual (Brook 1972). His book explores these features, which can produce a successful experience or a failure. He identifies that merely representing the semiotic narrative of playscript does not necessarily translate into this 'happening'. On the contrary, Brook argues a performance that is constrained by its literalness can be stilted and deadly due to this. Merely understanding the taxonomy of signs in a production as reflective of everyday exchanges does not mean that translation of the metaphorical meanings ascribed to them in the performance context is consistent; that requires an individual's imagination. However, it is clear that the 'frame' of performance can give way to this 'transformative' moment.

We all have a sense of what 'good acting' is or should be; the cause of this logic has become so taken for granted that it is almost impossible to separate a good performance from a bad one in any cognitive way. While you read this you may be remembering the times from your own experience that you endured a bad show or were elevated by an inspirational performance; the times when you empathised with the characters plight or the actor's pain. You too are aware of the emotional power of a live performance, be it positive or negative. Now, just as an exercise, ask yourself; what made the good performance good and the bad one bad? Can you locate the reasons in any tangible way? Most people eventually retreat to a statement that does no more than summarise the 'believability' or authenticity of the performer/performance. And in this respect, you have taken something for granted. You have cast

your mind back over your personal experiences of theatre performance and recalled with nostalgia the feeling it evoked in you and your relationship to that moment within that group of people. And that is the point: the idea that you project your own interpretation or meaning based on your subjective point of view, which is then reflected onstage and your ability to read, imagine and interpret that reflection.

This presence is often difficult to explain or understand when it is working seamlessly. It is often easier to get at a deeper understanding when exploring the failures, or when performance does not work (Schieffelin 1996); we can all recall a bad performance and identify where it failed, but seldom can we identify exactly why/how a great performance achieved its success. It is no wonder this is a complex experience to unpick when the job of a successful actor is to walk that fine line between the obligation to perform activities that are "…expected to mirror reality, thus to play deliberately with the codes of everyday speech and behaviour" (Wilkinson-Weber n.d.). Yet, as Brook explains, any reification of process when creating a play can be as 'deadly' to the experience as abandoning all rules of process; a literal understanding of the text or a process does not imply you will communicate the meaning (Brook 1972). These examples show that to understand the power of theatre one has to go beyond symbols and systems of semiotic dissection in a social conversation, to one that is bracketed out from the everyday. It would appear that a further exploration of the structures that form personhood in a social environment are altered in a theatrical context, and in so doing shared communication of meaning is possible between 'realms' of personhood and identity that would not normally be possible.

So here then is the landscape upon which the research presentation component of this work is based. There is the phenomenon of autism, which is in contrast to the craft/technique of acting and performance. The craft of acting, the almost empirical training techniques located somewhere between phenomenological embodiment and psychology, is being used in order to create masters of subtle non-verbal communication; be they conventional actors creating authentic 'persons' for theatre, stage and film or as therapy models for autistic people so they may relate more 'normally' in everyday social encounters. In either case the purpose and practice is deeply embedded within the constant exchange between empirical knowledge, habitus, subjective experience and reflexivity.

This research is at the intersection of this dichotomy of discourse; both poetic and academic. It investigates, analyses and presents evidence of the space between formal speech and rhetoric in what is colloquially known as the arts and sciences. The scientific method by its nature is categorical, empirical and needs to be accurately and clinically supporting and communicating materialistic research and findings. It would simply not be acceptable to couch the discovery of a cure for cancer with the

language of a television commercial for example. Law, politics, diplomacy, medicine, journalism (ideally), business and science require rational and reasoned exchange of dialogue. They require language that does not misinterpret, falsely characterise or incite emotional response from the listener. Baumann suggests the "analogy to language… suggests that the elementary unit of a performance-text is the iconic sentence" (Rozik 2010: 11). This echoes the scientific method in as much as an experiment must be repeatable. In order for it to be repeated there must be clear and specific terms of reference and explanation. The playscript, therefore can be understood as this repeatable term of reference. The texts of Shakespeare, as an example, are indicative of this and are constantly replicated. If an experiment concludes a different result then eliminating any misinterpretation is critical. However, in respect to the script, as suggested, its re-interpretation is important, for an exact replication of a performance would at best serve as an historical account of style and at worst be considered a lazy reading, 'deadly' to the cathartic happening as Brook would say. It behooves anyone to understand the social context they are engaged in order to be communicated to in such a way that they accurately and effectively correspond to their everyday experiences.

Of course in performance rhetoric, imagination and metaphor not only exists in language but is considered the norm. Theatre uses language expressions that deliberately toy with established meanings: poets and playwrights, wrangling meaning, drama and emotion out of every syllable. But if we broaden the definition of language to its semiotic extreme this also includes then computer programmers, painters, dancers, sculptures and anyone who reconfigures and re-imagines semiotic structure patterns in a creative or abstract way. As colloquial turns of phrase are developed and spread throughout the world, as new technologies re-frame the verbs and adjectives of everyday existence, so too does the formal construction of language change over time. Poets, artists, political orators and writers use the full expressive power of words and their contexts to reshape and re-imagine ideas expressed through language. The most accessible example would probably be Shakespeare, who most people recognise for his huge contribution to the English language; setting down formally for the first time new words and phrases most probably drawn from the colloquial language of the day. Or for a more contemporary example I suggest the Hip Hop music genre where metaphor, similes and word association are so prolific that a song using contemporary and socially specific English language can be as foreign to a listener now as a now extinct language from hundreds of years ago. Artists particularly, use language systems as a tool of their trade and proudly wear the responsibility of using it to affect emotional responses in their audience.

Language is also the priory form of expressing the exotic other in anthropology in the form of exegesis. A separation exists between clinical highly formalised and structured language with regards to academic and scientific research (Fisher 2006). It has been taken-for-granted that this language, communicates factual truths, and that poetic speech is somehow subjective and aesthetic, masking or distorting empiricism (Cassell 2006). However more and more, the idea arises that creative presentation of academic work can, in some cases, be more appropriate to the explanation of complex research. The contexts of language, meaning and representation that surround autism and acting and the research entailed in this presentation certainly lend themselves to that. Many disciplines have found that a creative approach to generating data and communicating results is a powerful tool for contemporary research. In Anthropology there is a sound argument for the use of performed ethnographies (Atkinson 2004, Bagley 2008, Bauman 1999, Conrad 2004; 2006, Prendergrast 2006) as authors recognise the sense of balance between communicating lived experience via the formal structure of performance based on detailed ethnographic research methodology. This "ethnodrama" (Mienczakowski 1995, Rolfe 1995) is a powerful device for communicating research knowledge for it;

> *is written in a public voice and is translated into performance in an accessible and unassuming form, its agendas are instantly open to interpretation by non academics as well as by the academy. To ensure reflexive interest from target groups, the performance aspects of ethnodrama depend on the process being a mode of high-profile ethnography that embraces media coverage and public debate.* (Mienczakowski 1995; 368).

This approach naturally has identified political implications within the discipline (Beyes 2011, Fisher 2006, Brydon-Miller et al 2011) but a consensus is forming that performative outcomes of social scientific work are, firstly, no less an assemblage of edited facts and experiences as like any ethnographic account and secondly, by using participants in the research, there remains a sense of autonomy and ownership on any representations about them as a result of the research. There will probably always be a distinction drawn for and against this especially as performance is not so much intended to be interpreted but experienced (Denzin 2003, Cassell 2006, Conrad 2006). For this exegesis though it is enough to recognise that there exist formal structures for the interpretation of analysis via theatre (Mienczakowski 1995, Rolfe 1995, Nicholson 1999). Whether this interpretation is by way of (as much as possible) an objective and reflexive account or via the perceived and lived experience of performance, there continues a thread that research and analysis be guided by ethical and scientific principles.

Creative analysis

In many ways a creative process is entirely appropriate for an academic dissertation. Artists are trained in crafts and techniques based in formalised structural processes, as are academics in research practices. The creative processes, although different for every artist, still can be seen to involve rituals, process and research defined by parameters and protocols that are applied both internally by the artists to methodology and from the outside with regards to institutional frameworks, funding and determined outcomes. In regard to acting and performing there are numerous techniques available to the artist and a strong community surrounding their ongoing evolution with regards to emerging technologies. Performance itself is a focus of much research based upon the exploration of social performance by established authors such as Turner (1982) and Goffman (1975), who explored how social performance was constructed and about its effects on practitioners and observers, as have many others. Goffman's analogy of 'masks' and front stage and backstage representations of the self in social contexts is itself based in the realm of the theatrical. Performance is linked to many social phenomena but in more contemporary writings the relationship between anthropology and theatre performance particularly has been developed. Work by Beeman (1993), Hastrup (1995), Mienczakowski (1995), Rolfe (1995), Schechner (1985: 1988: 1990), and Odin Teatret (the International School of Theater Anthropology founded by Eugenio Barba and involving theatre practitioners and anthropologists from around the world) to name but a few have explored both reflectively and progressively (with regards to Odin Teatret) the practice of theatre performance and social structures. And more recently articles such as those by Pedelty (2001), Barone (2002) and Wilkinson-Weber (2001) have explored the teaching value of 'ethnodrama', with its ability to dissolve "the artificial distinctions between the work of theater and the work of social scientists" (Barone 2001; 261) and "shift imaginatively from the world of the play into their [the audience's] own lives" (ibid; 258), thus bridging the gap between research, observation and experience. Subsequently many modern acting techniques are grounded in philosophies of order to access an emotional reality. Technique, in as much as it is a structured approach to method, is crucial to transferring the training actor's life experience via craft into a communicable and experiential experience. In this sense the applied technique of craft to explore and represent a lived experience is echoed in the same approach to ethnographic study and therefore it is worth employing both, rather that reifying either, to communicate knowledge

Fieldwork research has been employed in this project as the premise of analysis, drawing on classic models of ethnography. The aim is to understand the lived experience of the group and the influences on people that inform the meaning in their lives. Communicating this with respect to the individual agency of those studied has been a significant position adopted over the last forty to fifty years. It has

long since been rejected that anthropologists speak for or on behalf of their participants, although many do. It is no longer acceptable to hold the omnipotent position, and instead reflexivity and recognition of the cultural lens through which the anthropologist observes is respected. It would appear that this acknowledgement then creates the theoretical gap within which the poetic discourse can be employed to present analysis of ethnographic fieldwork (Figure 1). In this case the performance is a rhetorical interpretation of selected observations and the imaginative reconstructions should be adopted for their ability to cut through the academic jargon and create a visceral perceived experience for the audience of any research (Stewart 1993, Morris 1995, Giacche 1999, Kontos and Naglie 2006). Performance instead capitalises on Brook's potential for cathartic 'happening' in a way that truly engages the audience with the lived experience of the subject and by doing so generates a deeply shared experience of the other.
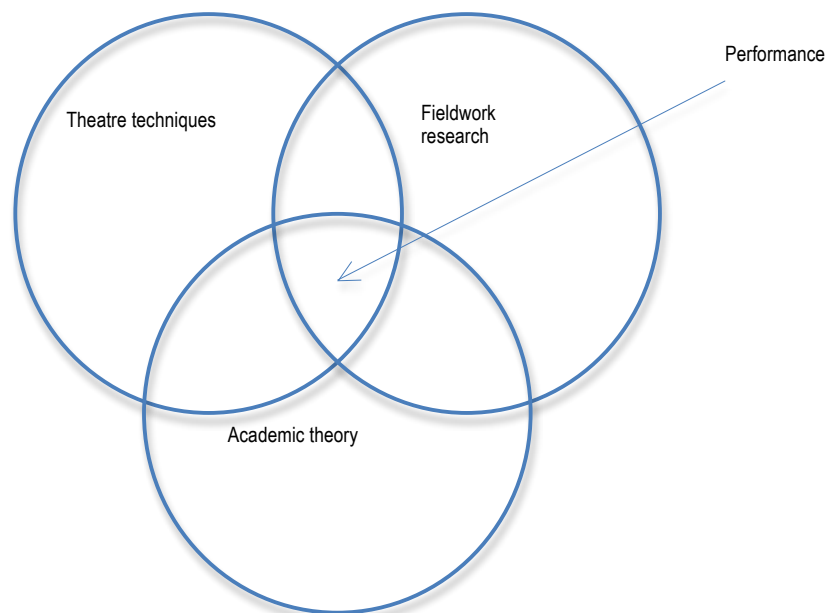
Fig. 1 *the location of the ethnodramatic performance experience is nested within comparable ways of viewing the lived experience*

Conventional cultural creative development practices already employ a creative process reflective of a community's identity:

> *social and developmental changes take place alongside artistic outcomes through the exploration of ideas and issues; community members and professional artists share knowledge and skills, working towards a common goal; a community's culture is expressed, explored, interpreted, presented or developed.* (ccd.net, viewed 2014)

The empirical nature of research in this context identifies that an element of creative fiction is needed in order to *"change"* a community is the outcome whereas a traditional understanding of academic analysis is to witness and report without interference in the 'natural' social landscape. This is where the empiricist may claim that artistic license, imagination, rhetoric or metaphor does not provide knowledge and that it is subject to personal aesthetic choice at almost every step of the way. However, in many cases the objective is not to re-imagine or change identity but more to claim autonomous representation of identity in order to provoke further investigation of social identity. Rather than be spoken on behalf of by others, Community Cultural Development projects, which are indicative of any creative process, establish a way to express identity with autonomous control and to claim a space in the contextual conversations that surround the community or group. In this sense, then, the dangers of subjective representation of any fieldwork analysis are at least within the control of the subjects for whom the work is about. The effect of knowledge/empathy/understanding, however it is communicated and consumed, does not diminish the integrity of how that knowledge was gained and shared.

To put it another way, any theatre (artistic or social) is the result of experimentation and choices that are made which acutely and accurately deliver a focused narrative. The performance is the focal point of action, which has been distilled through multiple experimentation and pragmatic circumstances (Schechner 1988). Let me give a brief example of how this might look for a theatre production by the subjects of my fieldwork. In the first instance, the ensemble must present a proposal for a project to their governing body (in this case A.R.S.). They then must approve it based on the business model and focus of their organization for the project to go any further. If approved, the ensemble must then apply for production funding from an approved cultural philanthropic organisation (in this case Beigeville Arts). The application of said grant money must be shown to be in context to directives of the particular selection panel that assigns the funds against the criteria for which the funding is to be applied and in contest with other applicants. The applicant (SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY) will need to argue many aspects of the final product in anticipation of the resultant effect of the work on a consuming public; outcomes they can only anticipate and therefore hope to achieve. With grant money awarded, the rehearsal process begins; itself a selection process of meaning and symbolism made by trial and error, discovery and exploration of delivery. Decisions about what is to be performed and how are finally made, but this cannot be claimed to be the final outcome until these performances are tested against the receptiveness of an audience. All these variations are 'nested' (Schechner 1988) within the broad social and political landscape of the company and its relationships with other organisations. Finally the performance itself is also nested within corporeal environments of the public sphere such as a festival or conference as well as the physical space; a theatre or performance space within a building within the

landscape of other structures. Is this not a reflection of the writing up of a thesis or any anthropological dissertation? A researcher observes the multitude of experiences but can only ever write about a selected few. They prepare drafts and redrafts of a text that is filtered by decisions of what to include and exclude. They select various experiences from their fieldwork notes and draw out the key features. Against these selected features they apply selected theoretical analysis and attempt to write a work that re-imagines and engenders understanding of meaning in the reader. In the case of this researcher, the format of the delivery is also considered; an exegesis and script. In effect then the essay is a node of meaning within the context of the subject matter and theory, as is the performance to an audience. However in both cases the meaning does not conclude as a fixed point at the reading or witnessing of the final product. From the point of consumption onwards the knowledge and/or experience becomes part of the entire landscape on the subject and is digested and contested, informing further reimaginings of the material and its meaning.
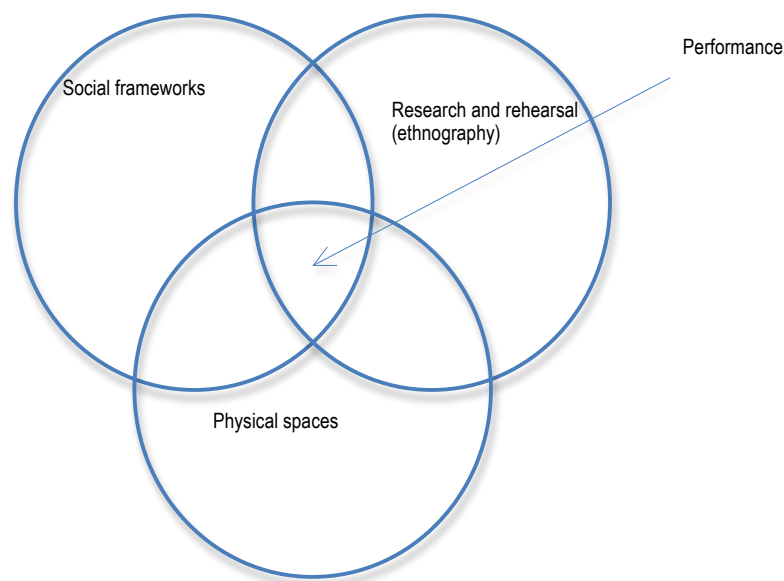

Fig. 2 defining a space for performance requires a synthesis of real and imagined social space

The fieldwork involved in this research identifies the structures that frame performances by the ensemble and by extension the identity of the group more broadly. Throughout the fieldwork the greater frameworks of organisations that umbrellared the ensemble can be seen to be having a direct impact on what and how the ensemble created work. Initially a support group run by A.R.S., halfway through the fieldwork this relationship broke down and a period of liminality existed while the ensemble negotiated terms to be supported by a dedicated disability arts organisation. So in speaking to the frames that identify the landscape of autism and the ability for those to speak for themselves predicated upon that,

this research highlights the nesting affect of performance to be able to suspend these everyday frameworks and create an opportunity to redefine and re-imagine them upon reintegration into the everyday.

So the purpose of this chapter is to theorise the play script that accompanies it. I recognise that it is a step away from the conventional thesis model. However the reasons are based in the essence of anthropology and the purpose of the visceral live performance. In both cases performance and writing is based on collecting evidence and experiences, editing and selecting elements that most effectively communicate the knowledge gained. In both cases the objective is to gain an in depth observational understanding of the other and by doing so generate knowledge and empathy. Where the two acts diverge is in the fixedness of the final material. A research thesis about a group of people is fixed in time and space. The words are printed on a date in time and bound within the covers. The reader reads in solitude surrounded by their own preferred reading environment, deciphering and cogitating upon the ideas presented. The reader may or may not engage with wider research and debate in order to explore and test the ideas presented, they may only ever read a fragment of the entire work and never really get a sense of the overall picture, whereas a theatre performance is a communal and ephemeral experience. The individual is part of a greater number of people all witnessing and perceiving the lived experience simultaneously. They employ all of their senses to consume the work presented to them in a place and time they have made an effort to be at.

> *The drama is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman; the script is the domain of the teacher, guru, master, the theater is the domain of the performers; the performance is the domain of the audience.* (Schechner 1988; 70)

The work in this sense is alive and dynamic. Although the text of the play is as dead as the words in the thesis, the process of interpreting and re-imagining it in future productions invites a type of reincarnation based on even more collective interpretations. This re-imagining again and again keeps the work alive in the minds and visceral experiences of the audience. What is more, it creates the chance to hear the voices of the participants and this is particularly valuable. Too often the subjects of anthropological research are distant from the reader, but within a performance the audience can actually hear them speak. Hearing them speak - employing the senses beyond sight and cognition of words on a page means that the audience member and the audience collective must process the experience. In this sense the research lives on; tangibly, viscerally and can be added to and reworked to highlight aspects and responses to previous interpretations. The play script and any performance of it is vital to the

ongoing communication and representation of participants and makes them not museum-like observations but engaged autonomous participants in their own identity. In the case of this project particularly this is important. If anthropology is, at its essence, a means of understanding how humans make meaning via some sort of self-reflective critical analysis, then performance is a collective version of the same presented as a visceral social experience of that meaning making (Sangren 1992, Koro-Ljunberg 2005, Grehan 2010). The theatre is a means of self-representation and claiming a dynamic identity, it is fitting then that the research on the participants is as reflective of this as any critical analysis. Returning to Nash (1999) and Jackson (2012), the value of performance in the discourse of anthropology should not be seen as an exception to the rule of anthropological practice, rather it should be embraced as part of what is necessary.
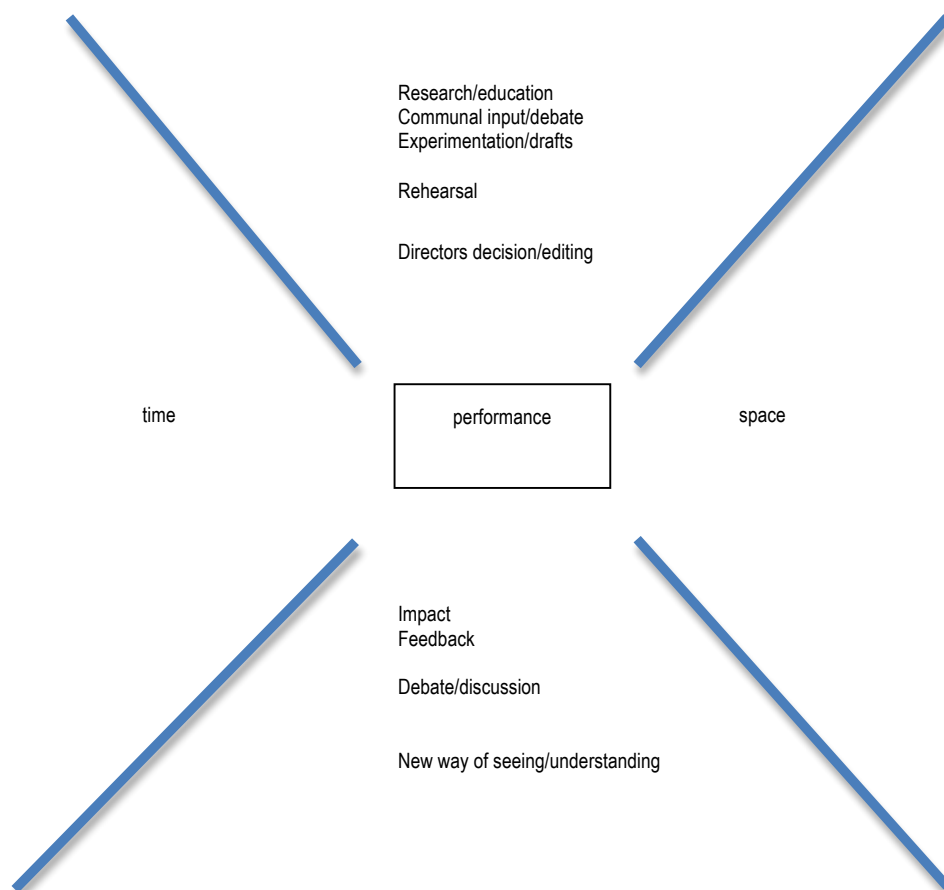
Research/education
Communal input/debate
Experimentation/drafts

Rehearsal

Directors decision/editing

time   performance   space

Impact
Feedback

Debate/discussion

New way of seeing/understanding

Fig 3: time, space and location

If "performance ethnography" (Turner 1982) can do anything, it harnesses the creative and reflective volume of energy across time and condenses it into the lived experience of performance. This crystallisation of all preceding thoughts and actions to create a performance ideally resonates with its

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audience long after the event. A performance then that retains a fluidity of interpretation within the audience is necessary. Performance that is too rooted in empirical fact and representation, echoes Brook's 'deadly theatre' (Brook 1990) and does not allow for experiential interpretation but more a consumption of data filtered through the omnipotent voice of the researcher. Likewise, a performance that is too interpretive with abstract representations that does not adequately reflect the audience's experience will be subject to claims of fantastical imaginings, which are not representative of fieldwork participants and could indeed reinforce 'othering'. A truly effective means of ethnodrama synthesizes over time the contributions made by all involved towards a representation (Figure 3) that considers metaphor and meaning; the cathartic 'happening' of the performance thus leading to new ways of seeing the world from a shared experience with those being represented on stage.

Epilogue

> *The Surrealist elements of modern ethnography tend to go unacknowledged by a science that sees itself engaged in the reduction of incongruities rather than, simultaneously, in their production. But is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities?* (Clifford 1988)

In an article called "The death of the artist—and the birth of the creative entrepreneur" William Deresiewicz (2015) reflects upon the position and identity of an artist and how it has been negotiated through the ages. Deresiewicz argues that the title of artist has a heritage as a more communal, collective contributor to the everyday lives of citizen states. This identity is particular to the contemporary western tradition. Deresiewicz identifies that the social positions have evolved across the centuries from that of artisan to genius and finally the contemporary identity of professional or entrepreneur. At all stages though, the artist is seen as a fringe dweller of societies, someone who participates and comments on the social milieu but as an outsider (or superior) and in turn contributes to the contemporary debates of said society. In this article I found the echoes of identity and position in which contemporary anthropology finds itself.

> *Against the values of the market, the artist, like other professionals, maintained a countervailing set of standards and ideals—beauty, rigor, truth—inherited from the previous paradigm.* (Deresiewicz 2015: 95)

In a contemporary environment of education as industry and the dissolution of the traditional etic and emic positions of Malinowski and the like, the anthropologist finds themselves in a similar context. How

does the authority of the anthropologist reconcile with the evolving habitus of communities and the position of culture creator? Artists seem to be able to move more freely amongst these ideas; reacting to social situations, rhetoric, bricolage, self-reflexivity is grist to the mill for most contemporary artists. However these are contested ideas in anthropology and debates about the writing of culture in anthropology can be traced back over the last two or three decades including Carrithers et al (1990), James et al (1997), Marcus (2002; 2012), and Strathern (1987). Clifford's account of surrealist anthropology in the early part of the twentieth century is intrinsically linked with the many artistic movements and debates of the time (Clifford, 1988). It is clear that the objectives of art and anthropology as means of exploring the human/social condition shared a concurrent space in art and research. Clifford seems to lament the division of these positions as categorical epistemology evolved:

> *at issue is the loss of a disruptive and creative play of human categories and differences, an activity that does not simply display and comprehend the diversity of cultural orders but openly expects, allows, indeed desires its own disorientation* (Clifford 1998: 140)

What seems to be the biggest dilemma for the anthropologist in the editing of cultural reporting is the moral one; who speaks on behalf of who and the cultural lens through which a group is researched. As an actor, director and producer before I was an anthropologist I do not have the same dilemma. I am all about self-reflexivity in art and the cultural framework within which it is presented. That said, I do not presume to speak on behalf of the 'other' but I neither do I fear representing my own perceptions of it. I mercilessly mess up, misconstrue and reassemble cultural adumbrations for the express purpose of stimulating an emotional as well as intellectual response in the viewer. Where anthropology research as self-reflexive actors seems to be antithetical to traditional conservatisms of anthropology (Wilkinson-Weber n.d.), I happily embrace both. The attending play script to this exegesis is this position made manifest. The text of the play is rooted in the multi-layered awareness of artist/ethnographer as creator of identity based upon research. It is as self-reflexive of the position of anthropologist as it is of the performer and the audience. It is an assemblage of research data via the techniques and paradigms of stage performance. To this end it is exactly how this research needs to be summarised for two reasons. In the first instance the fieldwork participants themselves act in the performance, therefore giving them some authority over their own identity as it is represented in the research; the participants actually speak. In the second instance, the journey of the characters, the deliberate use of theatrical staging (an assemblage of Artaud, Growtowski, Brecht and Stanislavsky concepts) and the subsequent discombobulating this engenders in the audience, is as close as I would suggest to the lived experience of the autistic person; a constant navigation and realignment of social masks in an environment where

unknown rules are at play. In this sense it is an attempt to understand the other, by way of experience, for the purpose of reflecting on our own lives, which I would argue is the ultimate goal of anthropological investigation.

Ironically the contemporary artist employs a faux academic rigueur, which can be seen in the emergence of Community Cultural Development processes and creative development paths for government funding. The discourse of research and performance continues in contemporary Australian contexts such as ADSA (The Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies) a collective of postgraduate researchers, which has "has an active core membership of more than 120 scholars and practitioners from 45 universities and organizations" (ADSA 2015) from across the world. And so the artist as researcher becomes a currency for legitimacy in the arts, reflecting methodology and integrity of representation. However, the artist's position as an assembler of this material is not contested. Debate may ensue about the aesthetics and message but the role and obligation as a creative interpreter is not.

But the script is not the play. Reading the words is only intended to act as a guide for interpretation by actors and director. The experience of the performance is not stated in the written word, which is subject to personal perspective and interpretation by the creative ensemble. Hence the attending performance forms part of this complete research project. In this sense there is a multi-layered delivery of findings, each shifting slightly the position of the reader/audience. This exegesis identifies the theoretical lens through which the events of fieldwork have been synthesized. The play-script is a written creative expression of these elements inviting the reader to interpret via their imagination the meanings, imagery, sensory experiences and metaphor. The performance is the final interpretation of all of these elements based on collaborative exploration with actors and audience, and so this entire project is more of a triptych of work exploring the experiences of this fieldwork.

From the outset I had the name for this project: "Chase the feeling". It is a term that implies structure and corporeality. The rules and frameworks of the performed play invite the chance for exploring feelings. This is indicative of the objectives of the participants in the research, striving to feel the buzz of performing, hoping to engender feelings in their audience, and all for the purpose of reimagining their lives defined by a framework of identity structuring politics, economics and medicine. Conventional discourses about autism (be they medical, governmental, social or even organisations claiming advocacy on behalf of autistics) leave their subjects passive when it comes to constructing identity. This is an echo of Edward Said's 'orientalism' in that it "attacks particularly the rhetorical devices which make

western authors active, while leaving their subjects passive" (Marcus & Fisher 1999:1). In an effort to challenge this control of representation (ibid) SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY embraces a medium by which these authorities must suspend their dominance. As audience members these 'authors of the autistic condition' must, by the terms of a taken-for-granted contract between performer and audience, remain silent and passive, their only responsibility to experience the suspension of disbelief the actors create with their performance. Not only must they individually relinquish their immediate relationship with autistic people as doctors, teachers, therapists, parents, and advocates, they also engage in the experience of the audience en masse. The audience to the performer is a collection of individuals performed and spoken to as a collective without acknowledging individuals. The individual experiencing the performance on a purely corporeal level, is nonetheless part of the zeitgeist as it were of the total audience. They are one of many with no identity. This is likely the very experience of the autistic person when they hear of themselves being discussed in the context of media, medicine and education. Again, the act of theatre, the physical spaces and the authorities that they represent, that unique assemblage of persons based upon prescribed and agreed upon relationships between performer and audience can be seen as a turning of the tables as it were; an inversion of traditional social arrangements. In so doing, this creates the opportunity for voices to be heard, feelings to be expressed and desires to be articulated. Now when it is considered that this space also gives permission for abstract, surreal and metaphorical representations of experience then an opportunity is created to truly allow for self-expression without the restrictions of rules of language and social engagement that are conventionally difficult for autistic people to navigate. All that remains is the subjective reaction to aesthetics of presentation. Craft and technical proficiency, as I have mentioned, is the foundation of actor training and the workshops of the SPECTRUM THEATRE COMPANY ensemble develop a theatre language that is far more diverse and flexible than Goffman's conventional everyday masks. These techniques are universal to all performers, regardless of background, and so the autistic actor finds himself or herself on a level playing field as it were. They are not more or less valuable or important than any other actor regardless of their background. Equality has been reached; equality with the power to speak with authority.

> *"And I'm a chase that feeling*
> *Take that pain and replace that feeling*
> *And I'm a take that healing then,*
> *Stand so tall they'll have to raise that ceiling"*
> (Lambert et al 2009)

Chasing the Feeling

The performance of the play was rehearsed throughout June and July of 2015 over approximately seventy hours. The rehearsal process involved discussion about the script from the mundane (the pragmatics of moving around the stage) to the conceptually critical (exploring representations of themes and concepts). This process resulted in minor rewrites of the script, often reflecting performance discoveries from rehearsal that could not be anticipated in the original writing. Originally all three cast members were also fieldwork participants, but during the rehearsal period one actor had to withdraw and so my wife (also an actor and director) stepped into the role. This actually complimented the casting of the show as now the cast included a spectrum of performers from neurotypical to autistic.

The play was performed twice on August 28, 2015 in the Studio at the Bakehouse Theatre for an invited audience of supervisors, academic and theatre colleagues, friends and other supporters. The attending DVD of the performance has been edited from the two showings intended as an archive only. Audience feedback from the performance was supportive and I intend to write further about the impact and responses. However, it is worth observing one key observation.

Many audience members did not know which of the actors were on the autism spectrum. Responses ranged from none of them to all of them and nearly everyone did not realize that the actors were a range of neurotypical and autistic. Also, the autistic fieldwork participants who attended as audience members felt empowered and fully represented of their experience from the play. There was a general consensus that the complexity of theory and the lived experience was fully appreciated via the form and experience of being part of a performance. In this sense I feel a sense of success has been achieved in terms of theatre, autism advocacy and more importantly, the value and efficacy of the theatre of anthropology.

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