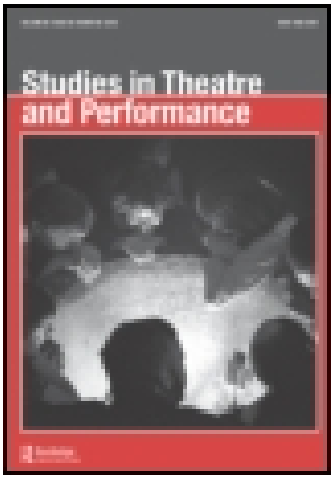

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Young audiences and live theatre, Part 1: Methods, participation and memory in audience research

Matthew Reason

Abstract

The 'liveness' of theatre performances is often presented as central to its definition, particularly when making contrasts with non-live performances on film or television. Yet there is little empirical research exploring whether there is a distinct character to the experience of theatre that is determined by its live performance. Addressing this need, this is the first of two linked papers presenting research resulting from an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded investigation into 'Young Audiences and Live Theatre'. In this first paper the methodological narrative behind the project is examined, concentrating on the importance of process and approach in determining the kinds of knowledge that can result from audience research. The paper explores how a participative ethos and memory-based workshop exercises were employed to engage the young audience members as active researchers into their own experiences and thereby begin to reach their own understandings of the liveness of theatre performances.

Keywords

audiences
liveness
memory
methodology
participation
young people

Introduction

The *live* performance of theatre is frequently presented as central to its definition, with 'liveness' constructed as crucial to theatre's ontology or nature of being. Indeed, the *live* status of theatre has increasingly interested researchers, producing contrasting interpretations of the significance of 'liveness' in performance (see particularly Auslander 1999 and Phelan 1993). Often these debates have gathered significant ideological and even quasi-moral import, as perceptions of liveness touch on crucial understandings of presence, origin and simulation in our culture.

Yet despite the centrality of the issue there has been little field-based, qualitative research into the impact of liveness on the experience of theatre or upon perceptions of liveness among theatre audiences.[1] Is it possible, for example, to identify a distinct character, a distinct phenomenology, to audiences' experience of theatre that is determined by its *live* performance? Of course each component of this question is impossibly large, and needs to be reduced to specific contexts and situations in order to address otherwise extremely fraught methodological challenges. This paper presents nothing more or nothing less than the narrative and findings of a qualitative research project designed to explore perceptions and responses to the

1. Recent exceptions are Barker (2003) and Reason (2004).

experiences of *live* theatre in terms of one specific audience – teenage school pupils – in one specific context – a school visit to a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Nonetheless, such an investigation remains extremely subtle and complex, with the methodological approach taken clearly crucial to the kinds of data and kinds of answers that are produced. Indeed, the self-aware employment and development of research methodologies was central to this project, responding to the need to develop new approaches to inherently elusive questions of audience perceptions in what is an under-researched area. It is in order to do justice to the complexity of the research that this paper forms the first of two parts. The second paper will present what might more conventionally be considered the findings of the research, exploring how young audience members articulate the felt experience of *live* performance and describing how liveness impacted on their perceptions of theatre. First, however, this paper presents the methodological narrative behind the project, stressing the importance of process in determining the kinds of knowledge that can result from audience research.[2] It also introduces the specific context and specific audience being investigated and examines the participatory ethos and memory-based approaches employed in the research.

The project

In order to explore the experiences and perceptions that audiences have of *live* theatre performances a series of one-off research workshops was set up with five secondary school groups from Edinburgh and central Scotland. These workshops were organized in co-ordination with the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, and run in close collaboration with Alison Reeves, education officer at the Lyceum, whose experience in working with school-children helped facilitate the workshops. The school groups attended the workshops shortly after having seen the Lyceum's production of *Othello*, with the workshops therefore around this recent experience – a specific and concrete backdrop that could then be widened out to explore perceptions of *live* theatre more generally.

The decision was made to work with young people in this project for a number of reasons, both pragmatic and research orientated. However, the primary motivation was that, as research participants, these young audience members would constitute a relatively coherent demographic, forming a group with largely shared life experiences, cultural references and vocabularies. This homogeneity of participants is essential in such group research, particularly in order to allow meaningful analysis to occur. Additionally, any differences between the groups would be relatively easy to identify and stratify, through consideration of age, geography and the demographic background of the schools involved.[3]

The schools were selected to cover a range of abilities and backgrounds: including participants from both an experienced drama class and one with very little experience of drama; from a selective and fee-paying

2. This focus recognizes the centrality of methodological approach, described by David Morrison as not a technical issue or a set of procedures but 'a struggle for meaning'. Morrison continues to describe the methodology as a kind of language, writing that 'what language we use shapes the nature of the conversation we can have with, and about, the world. Methodology is, in other words, the fundamental part of our story-telling technique' (1998: 3). This paper follows this description both in terms of how it narrativizes the methodological approach and in how it sees the participatory methods employed as presenting new kinds of conversations between researchers and research participants.

3. A further reason for choosing to work with school groups was an interest in the impact that the framing of live theatre through the educational system has on the experience. Every year thousands of school pupils are taken on visits to the theatre, frequently to performances of Shakespeare. Indeed, often these school trips form young peoples' first encounter with live theatre. In such circumstances, it is particularly interesting to explore what kind of experience these young audiences have, and what idea of live theatre they

School	School type	School location	Class subject	School FME (%)	FME area average (%)	Participants (n = 37)		Age
						Boys	Girls	
Alloa Academy*	State secondary	Clack-mannanshire	English	20.6	17.6	6	3	13–14
Gracemount High School*	State secondary	City of Edinburgh	English	33.8	16	3	8	15–16
Lasswade High School	State secondary	Midlothian	Drama	8.8	11.4	2	5	14–15
Mary Erskine School (girls)	Independent secondary	City of Edinburgh	Drama	N/A	16	N/A	5	16–17
Trinity Academy	State secondary	City of Edinburgh	English	13.4	16	0	5	14–15

Table 1: Participating Schools.
**Indicates school located in SIP area.*

independent school and from schools in areas identified by government agencies as needing investment to combat social and economic deprivation (designated as Social Inclusion Partnerships areas). In total, groups from five schools took part in the research, with the numbers in each workshop ranging from five to eleven. Table 1 provides details of the participating schools, presenting the figures for Free Meal Entitlement (FME) as a useful indicator of social class differences within school intakes.[4]

Inevitably a degree of local knowledge and familiarity with the UK education system is required to tease out information from this chart about the different schools involved and the different backgrounds and levels of experience and 'cultural capital' of the participants.[5] Additionally, the actual nature of each group and each participant was far more complex than can be explored here. However, a few points are worth stressing. Firstly, the geographic location of each school is significant, impacting on the physical accessibility of cultural activities and therefore also on their familiarity. This is then combined with the different social accessibility of culture to the different groups. Crudely, but also largely accurately, pupils from schools in more socially deprived and geographically dispersed areas are less likely to be taken to cultural activities by their parents. Finally, also significant is the class subject studied, determining the kinds of knowledge possessed by each group. So at the most diverse level the participants in this project ranged from those attending Alloa Academy – a school in a relatively deprived area, located away from Edinburgh, with the youngest and least confident participants, some of whom had never previously been to the theatre before – to the girls from the Mary Erskine School – the oldest participants attending a fee-paying independent school in a well-off, city-centre area, studying drama and possessing by the far the greatest sense of cultural knowledge and entitlement.

The diversity of groups involved provided the research with a diversity of responses, revealing a broad picture of young peoples' responses to *live* theatre performances. Across this diversity it was then possible to focus on

end up taking away from these school-orientated visits. This aspect will be explored in detail elsewhere.

4. Although not a perfect indicator of demographics, and even less so of potential attainment levels, FME figures are perceived as providing a good indication of the socio-economic characteristics of school intakes. In particular, they mark areas of unemployment and deprivation. Of course, the young people in these workshops may not have been a perfect representation of the school intake as a whole, being largely voluntary in their participation. Additionally, in the groups drawn from students aged 16 and 17, some further degree of self-selection had already been made in terms of their decision to stay on in school and choices of which courses to study.

5. Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) exposition of ideas of 'cultural

capital' is invaluable, ensuring that analysis of spectator experiences is rooted in awareness of class, educational and social specifics, all often of vital importance in analyzing and understanding the responses and accounts produced. Also useful is Willmar Sauter's emphasis on theatre as a social event in *The Theatrical Event* (2000).

6. For elaboration of ideas of action research and participatory enquiry see, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research* (2001) and Donna Ladkin, 'Action Research' (2004).

7. It is certainly the case that an alternative model for a participative approach would have started with the participants themselves, with a primary objective being to meet their interests and fulfil their needs in terms of some real-world output or action. In this instance the project started with a question that emerged from elsewhere and had end results that, as with this paper, would be of no significant interest to the participants. However, in being explicitly open with the participants about this question, the intent was to construct some mutual territory where the workshops might take place. While the participants might not be interested in an academic paper on liveness, or on

the similarities in the accounts, and the recurring and shared responses to the experience of watching Othello at the Lyceum Theatre.

The methodology

From the initial stages of this project a number of methodological decisions were made that would frame the research and direct it towards particular kinds of results and particular types of material. The most significant of these choices was the decision to conduct the research using methodologies that drew their inspiration and ethos (if not always, as will be discussed, their implementation and practice) from established approaches in participatory inquiry and action research.[6]

As a participatory enquiry, this project aimed to involve the young audience members themselves as active researchers in an open investigation into their own perceptions and experiences of *Othello* as a *live* theatre performance. In this manner it sought to conduct research with the participants rather than on them, recognizing and responding to the ethical and social responsibilities of conducting research involving people. Consequently, the nature of the research, the research questions, its purposes and its eventual utilization, were all made clear to the participants from the outset.[7]

So, in the approach adopted for this project, the research team explicitly elucidated questions and areas of interest, in order that the participants could engage with and explore them as co-researchers. In other words the central concept of liveness was explicitly presented to the participants as a question or problem to think about. Indeed, having agreed to participate in the project the young people were sent some material explaining the research project and presenting some initial questions for them to think about beforehand. This approach consciously and very deliberately recognized the participants as active audience members and individuals, an approach assumed for clear democratic and ideological reasons. Indeed, this ideologically directed approach meant that ethical considerations assumed a central position, shaping the approach rather than being begrudged as something to be paid lip service to.

One possible objection to this kind of approach, perhaps particularly in contrast to more traditional focus-group-based audience research, is that it implicates the researcher in the process, rather than seeking to adopt a detached position. However, as well as its ethical motivations, the methodology employed here was also adopted for epistemological reasons, following phenomenology in seeing knowledge as rooted in encounter and experience.[8] Within this epistemological world-view far more meaningful and revealing material would result from working *with* the participants and their conscious knowledge of their experiences and selves rather than treating them as passive vessels or inactive consumers. Experience is actively constructed by the individual, with the phenomenology of being in the theatre, something that could only be known through asking each individual to engage with the experience for themselves. The participants

were therefore invited to draw on their own experience as the tools and knowledge that would help answer the question of liveness.

Adopted for both ideological and epistemological reasons, this participatory ethos remained significant throughout the project, and was maintained in the process of reflection and dissemination: each of the young audience members and schools involved was sent a copy of a project report as a way of affirming and recognizing their centrality to the research. Towards the end of this paper some of the limitations and successes of the methodological framing and ethos will be returned to; first, however, I want to explore how these and other approaches influenced the distinctive practical format of the workshops themselves.

The workshops

Each of the five workshops lasted one hour thirty minutes, held either at the Lyceum Theatre or in the schools, as was practically appropriate.[9] The workshops themselves were divided into three carefully planned stages, each designed to draw the young people into the research project and encourage them to speak and participate freely and willingly. Each of these sections is outlined here, demonstrating how in each case the intention was to be open and up-front with the young people, drawing on participatory methodologies to help elicit and encourage responses.

Par 1: Warm up and introduction

Each of the workshops began with warm-up exercises, led by Reeves who drew on her experience of running schools' workshops to select non-confrontational and non-exposing theatre games. Partly intended to be relaxing, partly to get physically warmed-up, it is true that (as is perhaps often the case) some participants found the exercises personally awkward. Nonetheless, with the researchers themselves also taking part, they did usefully mark the workshops as different from a conventional classroom scenario.

These warm-up exercises were followed by a more formal introduction to the project, stating the kind of questions it was interested in asking, why it was happening and who it was for. Most importantly this introduction sought to stress that we were interested in what the young people had to say, interested in their 'felt experience' and that there were not (to purposefully employ the cliché) any right or wrong answers. Here, as in other aspects of the workshops, the intention was to avoid replicating the participants' educational experience, particularly as this is an environment where personal opinions are often excluded.[10] In contrast, this project was focused precisely on personal feelings and felt experiences, something that needed to be carefully communicated to the participants. As the notes for this section of the workshop put it: 'We don't want to tell you things or analyze what you are saying in any mysterious way. We just want to find out about your experiences.'

methodologies of research, the workshops sought to engage and interest them in exploring their own experiences and each others' perceptions of theatre performances.

8. Pamela Burnard usefully elucidates Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of phenomenology, writing of phenomenology as 'the study of objects and events as they present to, and appear in, our experience [. . .] in this way, experience as we live it becomes a function of how we direct our consciousness in a dialectical relationship towards the world (i.e. revealed by our attempts to construe events and objects)' (2000: 8). For this paper this last sentence is crucial, and in bringing participatory enquiry and phenomenology together one major objective was to invite the young audience members to reflect upon their experience and the construction of that experience through memory.

9. The intention had been to hold all the workshops in a studio space at the Lyceum, which had the advantage of removing the young people from the familiar but perhaps constraining environment of their schools. It was felt that their responses might be freer, less formulated by their educational experience, in a more neutral environment. Practicalities meant

that two workshops had to be held in the schools concerned; in these instances a similar distinction was suggested by moving furniture out of the way and changing the nature of the classroom space.

10. Henry Jenkins, for example, although perhaps overstating the case, suggests that in English Literature 'the student's personal feelings are rated "irrelevant" to the task of literary analysis' (1992: 24–25). Jenkins is cited by John Tulloch to support his own experience of running focus groups with schools. While Tulloch notes positively that the pupils' familiarity with group discussions means that 'unlike almost all other "audience" focus groups I have conducted, this one was unusual in its preference to talk freely with almost no intervention from the interviewer', he continues later to observe more negatively that 'In this sense the interrogatory dynamic [. . .] was replicating the forum of the tutorial or A-Level small-group discussion.' The result, for Tulloch, was an all but momentary exclusion of 'personal feelings' from the discussion, which were 'inevitably associated with the "formal curriculum," however hard we tried to make it informal.' (2000: 84–104). In contrast to Tulloch's experience, the

Inevitably, it is extremely difficult for workshop participants to accept such statements of neutrality and objectivity. As a class teacher commented after the first workshop:

> One or two of them did say as well afterwards, they did have the feeling that sometimes you were looking for a particular answer or you were waiting to see if someone would come up with an answer that you had in mind like a theory that you wanted to test out or . . . and being keen to oblige they were trying to find out what it was you were trying to say, but they didn't know what it was.
>
> (Personal interview, Trinity Academy teacher)

Although unfortunate, this kind of comment is not surprising, and researchers need to work hard to prevent such perceptions dominating. Indeed, at subsequent workshops this comment was repeated to the participants as a way of being honest that they might have such feelings but encouraging them to be as open as they could. In being up-front about the objectives, it was hoped that there would be no need for the participants to suspect a hidden agenda.

On the whole the openness of the project, its participatory ethos, and the attempt to be transparent as to its interests and questions, meant that this kind of problem occurred less often than it might have. Observed evidence for this was in the enthusiasm shown in the workshops, and in the informal, sometimes irreverent and sometimes personally revealing nature of the responses, all of which indicate a degree of commitment to the process and ownership of the ideas being expressed in the workshops. Indeed, the feedback from the participants about the workshops was on the whole extremely positive, with comments from other teachers including:

> I think generally they were surprised, they enjoyed actually giving their opinions. Nobody said to me oh, that was a bloody waste of time or anything like that, nobody said that. And when they went out there was a kind of happy feeling.
>
> (Personal interview, Lasswade High School teacher)

Tellingly, these responses and this atmosphere were produced having set aside a significant amount of time, almost a third, towards this process of warm-up and introduction. This is a perceived luxury that a lot of audience research doesn't allow itself, but which in this project was vital and well rewarded by the kinds of responses produced in the remainder of the sessions.

Part 2: Memories

Having warmed-up and introduced each other and the project, it was explained to the participants that the next stage of the workshops was going to consist of a series of memory exercises designed to help them think back into their experience of going to the theatre and being in the

audience to see Othello. At this and every stage of the workshop it was vital that the purpose of the exercises was made transparent to the participants, enabling them to see why they were being asked to do things and making it clear that there was no hidden subtext to the exercises or events. Here for instance, we first briefly talked about when they had been to see Othello, and how they had got there, using the frequent disagreements over exactly what day it had been and exactly what had happened to point out the elusiveness of our memories and suggest that some exercises might help in uncovering the details of the experience.

Indeed, memory formed a central conceptual and practical motif in the workshops, partly drawing inspiration from articulations of the importance of audience memory by Eugenio Barba, who places positive value on the transformative and fallible nature of audiences' recollections. Indeed, Barba declares that a performance can be considered as not what was happening on stage, but what is happening in the minds and subsequently the memories of the audience (1990 and 1992). Given what emerged in the workshops – revealing how the young members' attention was divided between the stage performance and various inter-personal performances with the audience itself – this valuation of the audience experience, and construction of that experience in memory, became vital. In particular it can be seen as valuing as real the distracted audience's experience, rather than condemning it as wrong or disattentive.

Combined with this conceptual valuation of memory was the understanding that, while we all may have experience and memories of being in a theatre audience, exactly what that experience is like is something much more difficult to consciously remember or put into words. If this project was interested in the felt experience of the participants, therefore, it was also vital to be aware that while experience forms one way of knowing it is always going to be intricately linked to memory and articulation as co-joined forms of knowledge. The attempt to access memory linked together these ideas of experience and articulation.[11]

With the aim of consciously engaging the participants with their own recollections and experiences, rather than working solely in terms of talk-based focus groups or semi-structured interviews the workshops employed a series of structured memory exercises – first involving solitary remembering, then verbal recollections in pairs, followed by public and written recollections in front of the group as a whole. The intention here was to move gradually from private to public, allowing the participants to get comfortable with the exercise before having to commit in public or in writing. An additional advantage of this approach was that it allowed various forms of expression – gestural, spoken, written, diagrammatic and drawing – that could hopefully release different kinds of knowledge and would not restrict material to the traditional discussion-based format.

In each of the workshops the first memory exercise was performed under the heading 'Walking into the theatre and finding your seat', which, as the starting-point of the theatre-going experience, was felt to be the

articulation of personal feelings dominated the workshops run for this project, suggesting that we were very successful in constructing an informal atmosphere and avoiding purely 'proper' responses.

11. Here the workshops drew upon techniques of critical incident charting and personal construct theory, where the interest is in how people make sense of their worlds and experiences. As Pam Denicolo and Maureen Pope write, 'It is personal constructs that qualitative researchers are seeking when they engage in research aimed at articulating the personal meanings of participants' (1997: 1–2).

appropriate point to start this disinterring of memory. For this exercise participants were asked to sit and close their eyes and imagine they were in their seat in the auditorium at the beginning of the performance of Othello. Opening their eyes they were asked to move as far away from their chair as possible and then to make the return walk as if they were walking into the Lyceum theatre and into the auditorium to find their seat. As they made this walk they were invited to remember the weather, what the doors were like, what clothes people were wearing, what kind of noises they heard and so forth. They were then asked to repeat the exercise in pairs, doing the same walk but taking turns to tell each other what they were seeing, hearing and feeling – and also to start asking their partner questions to elicit further information. In addition to helping the young people think back into the details of their experience, the physical nature of this exercise (asking them to perform the walk, rather than merely imagine it) was also designed to stress the non-school, informal nature of the workshop enquiry.[12]

It was only having made the walk to their seat twice, once in silent memory, once in shared recollection, that the participants were asked to present these memories in public. The entire group gathered round a large sheet of paper pinned to the wall and each took turns to talk about their memories of 'walking into the theatre and finding your seat', each in turn writing these on the poster on the wall (Figure 1).

Having begun this process of thinking back into the experience, the participants were then invited to engage with other memories and other aspects of attending the performance. Several large sheets of paper were spread out on the floor around the room (again an informal touch, which, along with other individually minor aspects, such as using fat marker pens to write with, was designed to invite informality and confidence). Each sheet carried a different heading – 'Something you heard (on or off stage)', 'Something that caught your eye (on or off stage)', 'Other people in the audience' and 'The actors' – with the participants being asked to write at least one memory on each sheet (Figure 2).

With this exercise a conscious decision was made to provide the participants with headings under which to group their experiences. The obvious alternative, and perhaps the theoretically more objective option, would have been to have left the sheets blank and asked the young people to simply write down whatever they remembered. There were a number of reasons why this route was not followed. First, it was felt that without some direction the process could potentially fail altogether (unlimited choice or freedom can be numbing) or else simply take a huge amount of time and require a huge amount of prompting, thereby voiding any neutrality in any case. Second, the project had always been clear about what it was asking the participants to think about. The headings and the breadth of experience that they indicated (off stage, on stage, the audience and the actors, during the performance and before) invited the participants to think across the whole of the experience, rather than more narrowly just about the stage performance proper.

12. For some of the participants there was a noticeable degree of embarrassment and awkwardness with this exercise. As Reeves commented: 'I think the memory exercise was a bit embarrassing for them and some of them felt a bit exposed in a space, but I think that's always going to happen when you make people do anything in a space: when you're doing something individually and you tell them not to look at each other they always do.' (Personal interview, Alison Reeves)

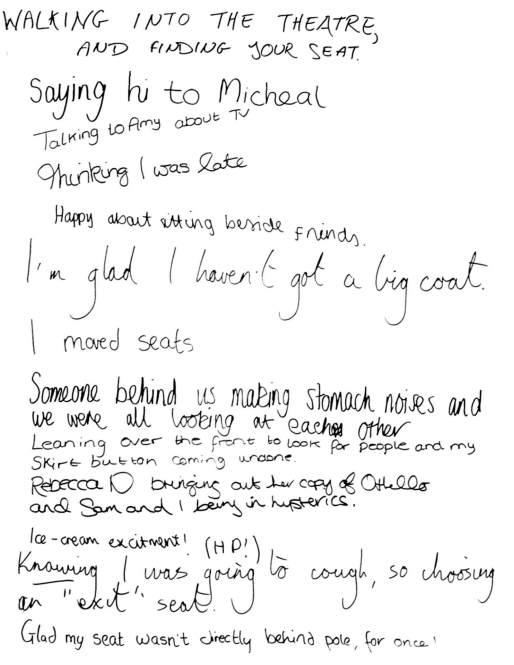

Figure 1: 'Walking into the theatre and finding your seat' (Trinity Academy). Used as an opening exercise, this heading prompted a whole range of memories. As with this example many recollections were about the building: whether about the seats in the auditorium, getting lost or admiring the chandelier. Also frequently mentioned were other people – both friends and strangers, each provoking very different responses – and various kinds of anticipation: here of ice-cream and of coughing, but elsewhere about the performance or provoked by the set. While partly incidental and even mundane these recollections stress the public and social nature of the experience and overall these posters create an evocative sense of the edgy buzz and awkward milling around that presages a theatre performance.

While some of these initial recollections tended to be brief, the third and final part of this series of memory exercise was designed to drill deeper down into the participants' memories, eliciting more detail about specific experiences or moments. Again this process and this intention were explained to the participants. This third exercise asked the participants to structure their memories in the form of spider diagrams, starting by selecting one of the memories they had already written down on the large sheets of paper and writing this in the centre circle of the diagram. It was suggested that they choose the memory that was strongest for them, the one they remembered best. Sitting on their own they were asked to close their eyes and think back into this single memory, as the notes for the workshop put it:

> Now, close your eyes and really try to remember that thing – what that moment was like. Focus on what you saw, heard, smelled or touched. Think about how you felt. Now widen out your thoughts to include everything else

Figure 2: 'Something that caught your eye' (Lasswade High School). Responses to this prompt were extremely varied, ranging from recollections of the performance to things and people in the auditorium; and covering both the broad and the very specific. Frequently noted things included the chandelier (again), the set and the number of old people in the audience. Indeed that 'hardly any young people' – in other words an absence – was something actively seen is very telling. Similarly another poster records receiving 'dirty looks' from other people as something that caught the eye. These were all things that the participants themselves picked up on and analyzed later in the workshops.

> that was happening at that moment. What do you see, hear etc. etc. . . . Now fill all the circles with as much as you can remember. Make more circles if you run out.

The intention with this exercise was to elicit detailed memories of specific moments, observations, thoughts or recollections. The participants were given time to work on their spider diagrams on their own, filling out and adding circles as needed. In each of the workshops this exercise worked extremely well, provoking some very interesting results and providing some telling evidence: Figure 3 presents one of the diagrams as an illustration of the way in which they can help us engage with the focus and attention of these young audience members.

The honesty and detail of these compound recollections is sometimes striking; each time we have the privilege of being placed vividly in the memory of another individual – or at least a chance of understanding what they were focusing on at one moment. Methodologically these diagrams, and the memory exercises as a whole, successfully provided access to what

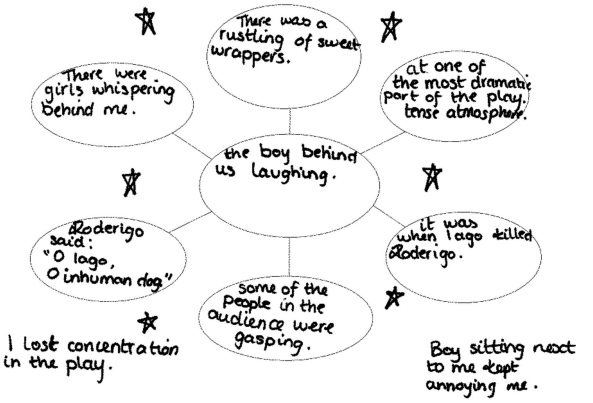

Figure 3: 'The boy behind us laughing' (Gracemount High School). This example is one of several dealing with the distractions caused by other people in the audience, here a boy behind laughing. This distraction is then placed into a specific moment in the production – a particularly dramatic moment, attracting gasps from the audience but also struggling for attention – and against the other activities of the audience. This level of annoyance, continual awareness and a kind of fascination with other people in the audience emerged as a prominent theme in the workshops, here communicated through a specific example, a specific memory.

can be phenomenologically understood as an experiential way of knowing – here it is clear that the combination of ideological commitment to working with the participants as active researchers was rewarded by fulfilling an epistemological desire to access a particular kind of knowledge.

In the workshops it was suggested to the young audiences members that perhaps it is our strongest recollections that reveal most about what a *live* theatre performance means to us. This being the case in the next stage of the workshops they were asked to reflect upon what these recollections said about their experience of watching Othello.

Part 3: Discussion and synthesis

While the material produced from the series of memory exercises is valuable in its own right, it also had an additional purpose in prompting the group discussions that formed the final stage of the workshops. In these discussions the participants (in one or two groups depending on numbers, but with never more than five in each group) were asked to look at the range of material that they had produced in the workshops and to reflect on the kind of things they had written and how they were provoked by the experience of attending a *live* theatre performance.

This section of the workshops was recorded (something that was, again, explained and discussed with the participants) and later transcribed. These discussions were then analyzed qualitatively, first using NVIVO software to aid identification of the themes and languages used by participants. Techniques of discourse analysis were employed to identify common vocabularies, linguistic motifs and repeated thematic points and

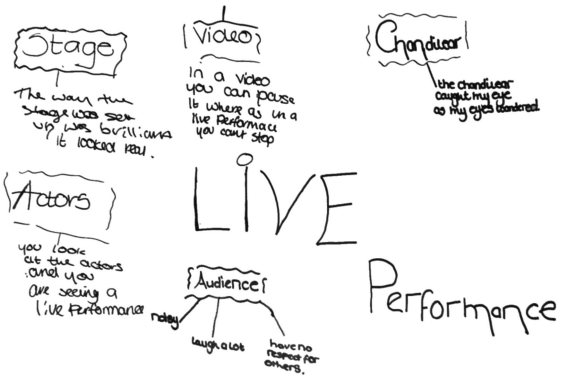

Figure 4: 'Live performance' poster (Alloa Academy). Members of the youngest group participating in the project produced this poster, with their age and abilities meaning that they did have some difficulties with the reflective stages of the workshops. As here, their responses were often limited to bald statements, which they were unable or unwilling to elaborate upon. Rarely did they move towards self-reflection or synthesis of ideas. The chandelier, for example, was frequently mentioned, but they had difficulty responding to questions asking why it caught their eye and what its significance was in terms of their experience of Othello at the Lyceum Theatre.

articulations.[13] In many ways this format of discussion and researcher analysis was the most methodologically conventional section of the workshops, sharing techniques, difficulties, rewards and pitfalls already familiar to researchers.

Central to these is the potential for researchers to direct and dominate discussion, particularly through framing conversation in their own terms and in their own language. As discussed earlier, particular problems here might have occurred as a result of the ages of participants and their location within an education system very much based around telling them things and giving them answers. As Reeves, who conducted some of the discussion groups, commented in a follow-up interview, at times it was very difficult not to feel that 'they were looking at you to see if what they were saying was okay [. . .] I think if there's a difference of opinion they tend to bow to your point of view very quickly, which is a difficult thing' (Personal interview, Reeves). Here the written recollections, very much in the words of the participants, and the open and participatory nature of the enquiry as a whole, were extremely important.

Also significant in this project was that the participants themselves were invited to begin the process of analysis, reflecting upon their own written comments and memories and with their own emerging categorizations and responses directing the subsequent analysis. This understanding of the young people as themselves active researchers into the question of liveness, rather than passive participants, was then continued and reinforced by the final exercise of the workshops, which saw a movement towards conclusion and dissemination.

13. There are, of course, multiple different strands to discourses analysis. This paper does not intend to explore in detail this aspect of its methodology. Centrally, however, the interest of discourse analysis is in exploring how people articulate their experiences, connecting with personal construct theory in its attention to the diversity of meanings that individuals construct around their experiences. See for example Willig (1999) and Burman and Parker (1993).

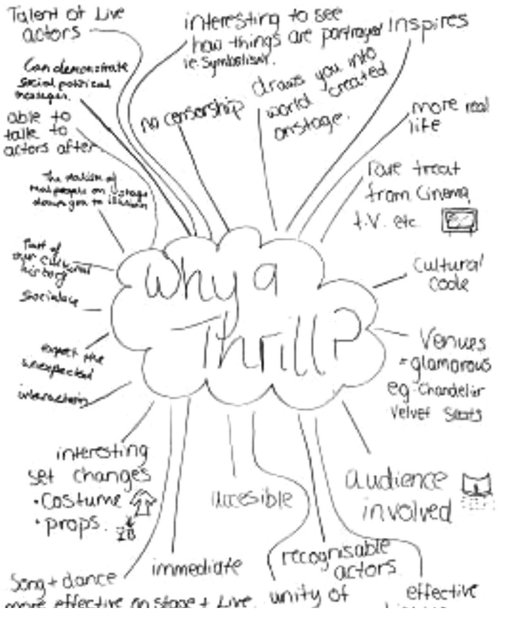

Figure 5: 'Why a thrill?' (Mary Erskine School). A stark contrast to Figure 4, this poster was produced by girls from the oldest group that participated, who also had the greatest degree of experience of the theatre and greatest personal investment in theatregoing as an activity. All this is clearly evident in the poster they produced. Here they chose to respond to an advert they had been shown that promoted theatre under the heading 'experience the thrill of a live performance'. Many of their points and responses are extremely legitimate and were used to help direct subsequent analysis. It is possible, however, to see both the format (similarly, several groups produced posters in bullet form, replicating an official report) and content of this poster as fairly 'proper', editing out many of the kind of comments they had produced elsewhere in the workshops. This is particularly clear when it becomes apparent that all the comments here are positive.

It was explained to the participants that various kinds of reflection and reporting were going to result from the workshops, each attempting to address the question of how young audience members experience *live* theatre. The young people were then asked to begin the process of writing this report and answering this question themselves by forming groups and preparing posters that would communicate what *live* theatre meant to them. For this final exercise it was hoped that the participants would build upon the experiences they had already explored, both in the memory exercises and in the discussions, and develop their own synthesis of the ideas produced. See Figures 4 and 5 for two examples of the posters produced.

Conceptually this stage in the workshops was extremely important in valuing and asserting the participants' central position in the research process. Theoretically it could even form the only piece of reflection, with the workshops having aided the young people in thinking back into and

through their experience and the posters then representing their own expression and communication of that experience. In a participant-led project the posters might then represent the answer, the outcome. This perspective draws from ideas of co-operative enquiry and action research, particularly in terms of the concept that the participants involved take part in the sense-making process (Ladkin 2004).

In practice this outcome is more difficult to accept and perform, not least because other and different kinds of outcome and reflection were envisaged at the beginning and demanded by funding and academic institutions. Additionally, there was no next step or practical outcome that the participants could contribute to,[14] a difficulty perhaps inherent to research from which conclusions are to be drawn in abstract rather than in practice. There were also some practical limitations that restricted the process of constructing the posters and which hindered the fullness and value of some of their statements, the first being that often by this stage in the workshops time was short and construction of the posters could not be given enough scope. Secondly, having concentrated and worked hard for one and a half hours, by this stage the young people were themselves beginning to get mentally tired. Thirdly, particularly for the younger group from Alloa Academy, this poster exercise stretched the participants' abilities to articulate their opinions with regard to a fairly abstract and complex set of questions and experiences.[15] Finally, and more contentiously, there was also a sense that some participants (although by no means all) reserved only their proper, or respectful, conclusions for the posters; almost unconsciously self-censoring some of their less delicate but still important and meaningful recollections. Perhaps this was provoked by a sense that the posters were for public consumption, perhaps because this section was the most similar of any part of the workshops to 'school work' and report writing or evaluation. Perhaps also they were attempting to deliver their understandings of what they felt I, as researcher, wanted – perhaps directed (certainly unconsciously) by a desire to please. Whatever the reason, these limitations in the effectiveness of the poster exercise left me in an awkward conceptual position: having promised that they were be central to the reporting and analysis process, but unable to fully embrace them or present them without a strong degree of contextual analysis.

It would not be accurate, however, to downgrade the research value of the posters entirely. Nor would it be fair to say that the findings were simply or directly reiterating the values of the education system, or the perceived values of the research project; indeed the participants would find such an accusation rightly insulting. Some certainly did contain elements of both revealing articulation of details of the *live* theatre experience and overarching synthesis of the concept of liveness (Figure 6).

Nonetheless, a degree of caution needs to be exercised when considering these posters, meaning that they cannot stand as the sole conclusions of the project nor stand alone as the most accurate articulations of the participants' experiences and perceptions of *live* theatre. Instead, part two

14. One possibility would have been if the workshops were part on an ongoing cycle of enquiry, with the participants attending a series of workshops and series of performance events, thereby allowing them to develop and explore their ideas at a conscious and self-interrogative level over a period of time and reflection. Clearly this would be a much larger project and one much more difficult to conduct around the everyday lives of the participants.

15. Indeed, this is something that was true for this group throughout the workshops, as, although they had not so much as struggled (indeed, they contributed with enthusiasm), their responses had often been fairly short and single-faceted. Clearly this is partly a result of their age and educational development, particularly in contrast with some of the older groups. As Reeves commented on this group, although they did not seem to be thrown by the questions or discussion 'they weren't very theoretical or analytical; they didn't draw any grand conclusions. They didn't even seem inclined to draw any grand conclusions; they were just happy to chat' (Reeves, personal interview).

Figure 6: 'Audience/actor relationship' (The Mary Erskine School). This detail from a larger poster provides an extremely succinct and revealing articulation of the emotional and sensual bond that can develop between audience and the live performer. Significant here is the decision not to use a conventional presentational format, but a stick insect cartoon style. This produces a more personal idea-image that does not merely replicate the expected, educationally approved norm. Indeed, the ideas contained in this drawing are a very sophisticated synthesis of the live theatre experience, a significant piece of research conclusion produced through workshops seeking to uncover precisely these kinds of experience-based responses.

of this paper will draw its analysis from across the range of material gathered in the workshops, from the written memory exercises, to the transcribed discussions, to the concluding posters. As a conclusion to this first part of the paper, however, it is worth briefly reflecting on the project's methodologies as a whole.

Reflection on methodologies

As explored in this paper, aspects of participatory enquiry and action research inspired the research methodologies and ethos of this investigation into *live* theatre and young audiences. With such an approach one goal would be for the participants themselves to reach a better and more complete understanding of their experiences, something that in this project would have been articulated through the final posters exercise. Now, I am not saying that this absolutely did not happen, indeed the feedback received indicates that to a degree it did. Reeves, for example, felt after the workshops that:

> from the young people's point of view I felt that it was a very useful exercise for them the majority of the time because it was engaging them in an analytical way, which they're not used to doing. They're not normally asked to think in an analytical or abstract way very often at school.
>
> (Reeves, personal interview)

Certainly, in engaging the participants with the workshops and the research questions the project was extremely successful: relaxing the teenage participants

and provoking noticeable enthusiasm and willingness to contribute personal reflections and responses. It did so, additionally, in a way that largely circumvented responses limited or directed by their position within the education system. The telling return on the participatory ethos adopted for the workshops was, therefore, the kind of relationship that was established with the young audience members. And the result was, in this sense, workshops that were genuinely useful to the participants in helping them increase their own understanding of their experience of *live* theatre.

Vital to the success of the project was the significant amount of time set aside within the workshops to introduce the participants to the research questions, and prepare them for the exercises. Too often such introductions are rushed in order to allow the maximum time possible for the focus-group discussion and data collection. Connected to this, the careful and deliberate structuring of the workshops as a progressive series of steps sought to bring the participants along by stages, fully engaging them with the questions through their own experiences. The result, in the memory exercises, was some extremely revealing and detailed representations of the experience of being in an audience. Indeed, the representations of the momentary experience, the here and now of being in the audience, that are presented in the spider diagrams stand out as something distinct and successful in revealing what is an ephemeral and often ineffable experience.

The ideology behind the methodology – using a participatory ethos in order to recognize and affirm the participants as active, thinking, conscious individuals – combined with an epistemology that affirmed the value and significance of the participants' own experiences *and* their knowledge as rooted in that experience. With the objective of reaching an understanding of liveness that was rooted in experience, it is clear that the participatory methods and memory-based exercises adopted in this research project become more than methodologies but instead very much ways of knowing and judgements about the nature of different kinds of knowledge. Here it was the experiential knowledge of the individual that was valued, with participatory research therefore becoming the only method by which that kind of knowledge could be accessed. If the participants themselves did not come to understand their experience, there was no possibility that the researchers could by proxy.

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