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## **Locating sensory labyrinth theatre within immersive theatres history**

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## **Locating sensory labyrinth theatre within immersive theatres history**

Abstract: Immersive theatres have emerged since the turn of the millennium as a popular form of performance. Intricate and elaborate, they interweave playfulness into the relationship between performer, audience, and performance space.

Discussion of immersive theatres has largely focussed on a selection of urban theatre companies who have acquired reputations as the forerunners in the field. On the periphery, other practitioners and companies have been developing immersive methodologies within theatre that are, as yet, largely undocumented within this scholarship. This paper contributes to the widening of this discussion by considering the work of Iwan Brioc and his sensory labyrinth theatre (s.l.t). It explores s.l.t within the context of North Wales, referencing its influences from Columbian theatre director Enrique Vargas's work on the "poetics of the senses" (Teatro de los Sentidos n.d., n. pag.). In doing so, it expands the current conceptualisation of immersive theatres, and in broadening the work being examined within this field, focuses on the transformative potential of the work discussed.

Keywords: Immersive theatre(s), sensory labyrinth theatre (s.l.t), Iwan Brioc, Enrique Vargas, senses

### **Introduction**

Immersive theatres have proliferated as a phenomenon of twenty-first century performance, becoming an established and popular form of theatrical consumption. Their numerous playful iterations have explored the possibilities of performance, through attention to the performer/audience relationship and interactions with the performance space, through a process of submerging the audience within the theatrical world. Differentiated as a form of 'experiential' practice (Groot-Nibbelink 2012, 416; Machon, 2013, xv), where the audience's role within the performance is central to their understanding of the encounter, immersive theatres have been proffered as offering a potential space for transforming the individual from spectator to participant in the

moment of the invitation (White, 2013)<sup>i</sup>, an act which can have deep and lasting implications for the audience member.

Immersive theatres have been contextualised within the larger body of participatory arts practice, including the expansion of multi-form arts through the twentieth century, particularly the 1960s Happenings and the growth of performance art, with extended roots in the long history of human cultures prevalence for participatory customs (see Machon, 2013).

Within the emerging discussions of immersive theatres, focus has been given to some of the most well-known, largely urban companies and practitioners, as a way of understanding the breadth and variety of this often exhilarating, personal, and experimental performance practice. Punchdrunk, Ontroerend Goed, Adrian Howells and dreamthinkspeak are just some of those who have received the greatest critical attention to date (see, Heddon, Iball and Zerihan [2012, 120–133]; Lavender [2012, 307–326]; Worthen [2012, 79–97]; Machon [2013]; Radosavljević, [2013a, 161–172 and 2013b, 243–259], and Papaioannou [2014, 160–174], as examples). However, as David Shearing has recently noted, it seems pertinent to consider the variance of expressions that are being called immersive, what he terms a ‘heterogeneous concept’ (2017, 144) that contemplate the range of ways that immersion is offered, and which inevitability affects the audience’s reaction to the work.

This paper seeks to connect the body of work of two theatre practitioners: Iwan Brioc and Enrique Vargas, within the current discussion of immersive theatre practices. It presents a body of largely rural immersive theatre practice, named ‘sensory labyrinth theatre’ (Jones, 2010, 38–39 [hereafter s.l.t]), in Brioc’s work that, has taken place largely within the region of North Wales, in the UK, but has been shared by Brioc globally through training and performance with an international body of companies and

practitioners, such as Compania de Teatru Labirint, Romania, and Calypso theatre company in Italy.

My attentiveness to this body of work stems from an interest I have noted in responses to these works, to foster deeply affecting personal experiences, particularly within applied and community settings. Examples of this work in immersive theatre have begun to take form, for example, Spare Tyre's creation of *The Garden* (first performed 2015) designed as an immersive experience for people living with dementia and more recently developed for people with learning difficulties. Brioc has conducted numerous s.l.t performances and trainings in marginalised or disregarded communities, where access to artistic provision can be a challenge, for example in post-conflict communities and with excluded and vulnerable youth groups. This perhaps explains the largely non-urban context for this practice, and the reason for its absence from the critical mainstream to date.

As a little discussed practice within discourse on immersive theatres, the examination of s.l.t in this paper marks one of the primary considerations of this work within the context of scholarship on immersive theatres. It opens up considerations of rural immersive practices, or those that take place outside the main UK cities, with which this form is largely associated and usually discussed within this context. I begin by contextualising s.l.t, before relating it to one of its main theatrical influences in the work of Enrique Vargas. I then focus on the development of s.l.t practice, particularly in the context of its origins in Wales, closing with a discussion of s.l.t and its relationship within the larger body of immersive theatres, utilising scholarly considerations of immersive practice.

## **Contextualising s.l.t within immersive theatre discourse**

My first experience of immersive theatres came in 2007 through a workshop in s.l.t following a sold-out run Theatr Cynefin's performance *Ysbrydnos* (roughly translating from Welsh to English as *Spirit Night*). That same year, I came across the work of Punchdrunk, who's sold-out production of *Masque of the Red Death* (2007) was utilising their now familiar structure of a large-scale promenade performance staged across a vast area (in this instance working with Battersea Arts Centre and utilising Battersea's Old Town Hall in London). In 2009, and having pursued s.l.t through training and workshops, I experienced Ontroerend Goed's *The Smile off your Face* at Salford Lowry on its 2009 tour. Around the same time, I heard a review on Radio 4's *Front Row* programme of Adrian Howells *Foot Washing for the Sole* being performed that year at the Battersea Arts Centre, as part of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT). Making connections and inspired by the interactivity and potentially transformative capacity of this body of practice, it became the focus of my research and practice.

S.l.t's particularity to Wales within the UK stemmed from a collaboration between Theatr Cynefin's Artistic Director, and creator of s.l.t, Iwan Brioc, and Golygfa Gwydyr, when in 2005 they constructed a one-mile labyrinth path (named the Caerdroia) into the Gwydyr forest near the village of Llanrwst. This has since provided a regular base for performance and training for s.l.t and other activities. Performances at this site were continued with regularity up until 2014, with a brief hiatus in the past few years due to the difficulty of maintaining this remote site. Many of those performing in the first performance at the site were volunteers with Golygfa Gwydyr and/or lived in the local community, and have been involved from the inception of building the labyrinth at the site to the continuation of performances by community company Theatr

Dan y Coed. Brioc, meanwhile, in relocating to Cardiff, has continued to share and develop his practice internationally through both his companies: Theatr Cynefin and The Republic of the Imagination. Whilst the Caerdroia provides a key focus in this paper, s.l.t performances have taken place in numerous locations, some of which have been site-specific or site-sympathetic, with others utilising black box theatre or other performance spaces where the performance is less strictly linked to the location.

Brioc's work with s.l.t has been largely absent from critical discussion of immersive theatres to date<sup>ii</sup>. Some discussion of one of its key influences – the work of Enrique Vargas with Taller de Investigación del Imagen Teatral and Teatro de los Sentidos – was charted in the late 1990s/early 2000s, prior to the current proliferation of research on immersive theatres (see: Christie and Gough 2003, 94–103; Christie, Gough and Watt 2006, 305, 311 and Kershaw 1999 and 2007). However, this body of research has (to date) not been connected within the current chronicle of immersive practice.

Whilst the etymology of the term 'immersive theatre' is difficult to trace, the term 'immersive' appears in Baz Kershaw's discussion of Vargas's practice, where he refers to the 'immersive experience' of being an audience member within Vargas's work (2007, 317–318). Kershaw's discourse on Vargas led on from his earlier discussion of 'radical' performance in which he refers to 'immersive participation' (1999, 24) within the performance of *El Hilo de Ariadne* (*Ariadne's Thread, The Labyrinth*, hereafter *Ariadne's Thread*), cited as taking place in 1996<sup>iii</sup>. Here, Kershaw noted both the sensory and evocative nature of the performance:

The long passages of utter darkness, the total disorientation in time and space, the constant state of uncertainty and expectation, the general substitution of the tactile for the visual, the rich array of textures and smells, the close interaction with the performers in their dimly lit chambers, above all perhaps, the constant invisible presence of helping hands in moments of uncertainty, hesitation, fear or even terror:

together these seem to have produced for most people a profoundly significant experience (205).

Kershaw's corporeal descriptions of the performance in his text, suggest the personal nature of the performance experience, and its transformative potential and significance for its audience. As Vargas himself has commented: 'an experience is a way of transforming something, creating something that first of all happens in your own body. So when we are talking about experience, we are talking about how to transform' (quoted in Gough and Christie 2003, 97). This is evoked in reviews of the company's work, such as in Holger Teschke's review of another of *Oráculos* (*Oracles*), when the performance travelled to Berlin in 1999 as part of the Theater der Welt festival: 'when I step out into the light at the end of the journey, I want to go back in [...] many linger near the shore of the Spree after the journey, as if they don't want to return to the loud, noisy city, which suddenly seems like another planet' (155). Teschke's use of the word 'journey' is highly evocative, giving a sense of space traveled and a feeling of being deeply affected by the excursion into the performance's world.

At the time, Kershaw identified the potential openness of Vargas's work to multiple audience responses, stemming from the possible 'individual interpretations' (1999, 207) offered up by the performance, where what is experienced positively by one person, may cause feelings of anxiety for another. This is a notion that has been discussed by Adam Alston (see 2016, 2013), who has expounded upon the relationship between the audience's personal sense of risk and their experience of immersive theatres.

### **Enrique Vargas and the 'Poetics of the senses'**



Enrique Vargas has termed his immersive work as exploring the ‘poetics of the senses’ (Teatro de los Sentidos n.d., n. pag.). The essence of Vargas’s ‘poetics’ is that the sensory elements of the performance are the source material for the audience, forming their experience. The sensory stimuli provoke internalised responses influenced by a person’s likes, dislikes, personal memories, and associations. In re-connecting the audience with the body’s sensory apparatus, which is normally dominated by our visual sense, Vargas’s work invites the audience to pause and reflect on their sense of self and the world through direct encounter with their sensory experience. A slow, ritualistic pace allows time for reaction, thought, and provocation from each stimulus, to occur. The performance evokes awareness of one’s self in relation to the world through considering one’s internal ego in relation to the external world.

There are elements within his performances that require responses to particular scenarios, similar to other immersive productions, such as those created by You Me Bum Bum Train, where the audience move speedily from one scenario to the next as the central protagonist within each scene. However, the pace and content of the performance vary their effect on the audience: in You Me Bum Bum Train’s eponymous performance (2010) at the LEB Building, in Bethnal Green, London, the experience was described as a sensory overload, moving the audience quickly at rapid fire from one situation to the next, requiring them to respond upon instinct, sometimes with mere moments of preparation. As a ‘fragmented and gently invasive experience’, the audience travelled from ‘American football coach to karaoke singer via job-seeker and politician’, through a series of fully imagined mini ‘worlds’ that place the audience at their centre and in less than familiar set-ups (Wilson 2010, 28). In one instance, audience members found themselves travelling lying down on a sushi restaurant style conveyor belt, to then arrive under a car vehicle and be faced with telling its owner why

work on it had not yet been completed. In another scene, a gum shield fitted in a dentist's chair becomes apparent, when, after crawling through a tunnel, the audience then finding themselves brought out of a hatch and into a boxing ring, then pumped up by a coach ready for the next round, which a ringing bell shortly announces. By contrast, the sensory interactions presented in both Vargas's work and Brioc's s.l.t, are offered to the audience at a temperate pace and as invitations to participate, whilst the sensory offerings are subtle and usually draw attention to one particular sense within each scene. In both cases, participation is dependent on the audience's willingness to engage with the performance, albeit variable based on their ability and knowledge of the form to interact on a level of their choosing. Further, the content and style of delivery inform the kernel of the experience and its subsequent affect.

Vargas has previously written that his work has offered a theatrical experience like no other that an audience are likely to have experienced: 'The trip takes place in a space where curiosity, amazement, and chance meet in the midst of silence, smells, darkness, solitude, sounds and tactile sensations that help the wanderer along his/her path' (Teatro de los Sentidos n.d., n. pag.). Terming his audience members 'travellers' (Teatro de los Sentidos, 2014, n. pag.), Vargas constructs all-encompassing environments transporting his audience into the centre of the sensory landscapes he and his team create. Intended to offer a chance for the audience to reflect and rediscover their self through unlocking their sensory memory, the use of sensory deprivation affords focus on particular senses, honing the audience's awareness of each sense in as much as they can be separated out from one another. This allows attention to be given to touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight in turn, but, in general, removes the dominance of the audience's usual attention to the visual and aural, to feel through the other senses, enhanced by low level, minimal lighting and occasional blackout or blindfolding.

The notion of play enacts an important role in Vargas's work, linked to a return to a childlike exploration of the world: 'As an adult, he [Enrique Vargas] set his sights in recovering the spirit of childhood: "I began to try and reconstruct the memories from childhood. So I began to construct games, and imagine a journey, to imagine games, through improvisation"' (Vargas quoted in Christie and Gough 2003, 99), from which the story of the labyrinth and its symbolism became key. The unlocking of memories and the creative exploration of playfulness is central to Vargas's practice. The performances often explore simple situations or moments through the senses and utilise the ideas of games and exploration within the performance dialogue, communicated through both verbal and non-verbal exchange. Alfred Seegert suggested that the difference between 'immersion' and 'presence' in virtual interaction could be described as the former referring to a 'being in' in the performance and presence as a 'being before'. It is from moving into a 'doing' mode, Seegert asserts that: 'presence is thus performed' (2009, 24). When we do not use a particular skill, our ability does not completely disappear, but it recedes. In a similar way, attention to the everyday details within our environment require exercising to heighten awareness; both Vargas and Brioc's practice look to enrich this concentration on the present moment. One of the difficulties for audiences of this work is their unfamiliarity with using non-verbal communication because of our reliance on and the dominance of the visual, and the expectation that theatre is largely aural and visual. We can see Seegert's 'doing' mode enacted in various ways in immersive theatres including Vargas and Brioc's: through the audience choosing their performance trajectory, or the way they interact within the performance (although performers and companies approach interaction within the performance in different ways).

Vargas initially developed his work in Columbia with Taller de Investigación del Imagen Teatral, before moving to Spain to form Teatro de los Sentidos. When he first visited Wales in 1994, it was with Taller de Investigación del Imagen Teatral for a performance of *Ariadne's Thread*, employing the Greek mythical story of the labyrinth as its subject, whilst using the one directional journey of the labyrinth for its form, also<sup>iv</sup>. Later, I will discuss how the labyrinth, as both metaphor and journey, is a potent symbol within Brioc's work. At its performance in Bangor University, a large concert hall was transformed to form a series of installations (the scenes of the performance, effectively), where the audience travelled one at a time from one to the next in turn. Actor Dyfan Roberts who experienced this performance of *Ariadne's Thread* described the experience some 20 years later, writing that the performance replicated: 'the life-journey it symbolised, from darkness to light and back again' (personal communication, 2013), describing it as, to this day, one of the most influential theatre experiences he has ever encountered<sup>v</sup>.

In 2001, Vargas returned to Wales with Teatro de los Sentidos to deliver workshops on his methodology. The company were also part of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) in 1997 and the Norfolk and Norwich Festival in 2007. Having toured internationally during the 1990's and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is possible that they have had a wider influence in this field than has otherwise been documented. For example, Jonathon Holloway (artistic director for the Perth International Arts Festival in 2012), described how his own encounter with *Oráculos* led him to programme the work in 2012 in Perth, Australia:

You're given a seed to hold and you walk through the labyrinth looking for the answer to your question: it's about memory; it's about childhood; it's about taste and sense and sound and smell. As a result, it enables you to go back and forwards in your life. It's about life and death. The first work I ever saw by this company was one of the most

affecting theatrical experiences I've ever had. I came out of it thinking, that's what site-specific theatre is all about. It's immersive. It was performed in 1997 at the London International Festival of Theatre and it was one of those works that changed the theatrical landscape. Everyone who's seen it remembers it and talks about it (Jonathon Holloway quoted in Keith Gallasch 2012, n. pag.).

Holloway's account provides a clear sense of the impact of Vargas's work and is evocative in trying to explain the experience without revealing its content. It does, therefore, seem pertinent to bring Vargas (as well as those he has inspired), into the current dialogue on immersive theatres, particularly in light of the varied and unexpected locations they have toured.

### **Iwan Brioc and s.l.t**

Following attendance at one of Vargas's workshops in Wales in the mid 1990's, Brioc was inspired to develop s.l.t. His first s.l.t performance took place in 2000 in Newport, working with artist Mike Hotson for a Millennium project in Fishguard, making it a contemporary of Punchdrunk, which formed at around the same time in Exeter. From there, Brioc created a further s.l.t performance in Newport (*Energy Labyrinth*, 2001) before taking his work to Ireland. In March 2003, his performance *O Labirinto* saw Brioc's approach in Porto, Portugal for the first time. In 2004, North Wales stage commissioned Theatr Cynefin to create a s.l.t performance in Conwy. Struggling to find a suitable large-scale venue, Brioc approached several community partners including Golygfa Gwydyr (who manage part of the Gwydyr forest on behalf of the Forestry Commission), with the prospect of looking to create a performance in the forest. A successful bid for European Union Funding via the Grundtvig programme (which broadly encompasses learning partnerships in adult education), to support the build saw the creation of a permanent labyrinth path within the forest that has since been

maintained by Golygfa Gwydyr with support from volunteers. Named ‘Caerdroia’ (a Welsh word for labyrinth that roughly translates to mean ‘circular fort’), the labyrinth was specifically intended as a space for creating outdoor s.l.t performance<sup>vi</sup>. As well as incorporating local artists, poets, and performers, a number of volunteers were drawn from those working in and around the forest as well as the nearby village community of Llanrwst, from schools, business and residents. Although not the only venue for this work in the area (a collaboration with Iwan’s second company The Republic of the Imagination – TROTI –, Pontio and the University of Bangor’s Psychology Department, saw the creation of *Cerebellium* between 2012-2014, which for the first two years was performed in a disused science laboratory in Bangor, and the last reincarnation transferring to a black box studio in Caernarfon), it will form the central focus of this paper.

In site-sympathetic uses of s.l.t, part of the early work in developing the performance involves story collecting, unearthing the history of the performance site, often finding connections between the landscape and the community as a way of creating material for the project, as well as interest. The site, whilst not necessarily the only source material, informs the narrative and shape of the performance. For example, in the 2012 and 2013 versions of *Cerebellium*, whose story was based on a fictional science experiment, the laboratory work benches were cloaked in black cloth fabric to create a blackout space, which the audience crawled through, in a space woven into the performance as signifying the interior mind of Project K, or Kevin, a conscious brain in a vat whom the audience are there to meet as part of an ethics committee decision on continuing the fictional project experiment<sup>vii</sup>. In black box studio works, story collecting has focused on the performance theme or narrative, bringing sensory material into the space. In the third iteration of *Cerebellium*, two yurt structures enclosed a figure of

eight path way, which mapped onto the shape of the human brain, with the two yurts housing the various interactions and story, which the audience moved back and forth between. In this way, Brioc's work in site-sympathetic contexts extends that of Vargas's re-connecting the individual to their own senses and body memory, by also creating a relationship to both community and the landscape through the performance. Writing in the original feasibility document for the creation of Caerdroia, Brioc wrote: 'We have touched on something very deep in its transforming nature; something significant in the re-orientation of self in society, arts and healing'. It is this interconnection of 'senses, our environment and our inner world' (Theatr Cynefin 2004, 17) that creates the drama of s.l.t performances: a re-discovery of the self and community.

Constructed through the forest landscape, the Caerdroia path uses the trees to create the 'walls' of the labyrinth. The path has a separate entrance and exit point so that the walker never retraces their steps (usually labyrinths require the walker to follow the same path out, however, this would be less than practical for the purposes of performance and is a common practice to allow ease of accessibility into and out of labyrinth designs). The start of the path is marked by a slate plinth with an impression of the labyrinth marked on top (see figure 1), so that it can be found amongst the trees and distinguished from the other walking and cycling paths of the forest. Since its construction and first performance, it 10 public sensory labyrinth performances have taken place there (six by Theatr Cynefin and four by Theatr Dan y Coed), as well as being used for a number of international s.l.t European Union Youth in Action funded artist training events.

*[Figure 1 about here]*

The structure of the Caerdroia replicates the design of the classic seven-turn labyrinth (see figure 1 above). Found in meditative walking practices, the labyrinth is walked as an aid to prayer or as an act of pilgrimage (see Helen Curry 2000 and Jim Buchanan 2007). As the walker circumnavigates back and forth, they are guided initially toward the centre of the labyrinth before being thrust out to its farthest point, from where they then meander towards the centre. If an audience member chooses to leave the performance for whatever reason, the permeable tree 'walls' allow the performer to cut through the performance space, promptly guiding the audience member out without the need to walk the entirety of the performance route. This format can also aid quick communication through the space as performers have contact with performers either side on the next coil of the labyrinth, not just the performers immediately preceding and following them. This is usually replicated in studio-based work, where performers can utilise a similar communication approach. This structure creates a sense of disorientation for the audience, whilst allowing a closeness and ease for the performers to communicate, should they need to, during the performance. In daylight, the well-trodden earth of Caerdroia is a clear marker of the path, whilst at night the audience must utilise their senses, recognising the feel of the path underfoot. With darkness impairing full vision, the audience must rely upon other senses than the visual to negotiate their way forward through the labyrinth. The trees themselves can prevent the audience from venturing off the path with trunks and branches indicating that the audience is straying too close to the walls of the path. They may also detect a change underfoot in the textures between the path and the detritus of the forest floor. If the audience is observant, they may notice that the tree canopy reveals a small gap where the path cuts through the forest, offering a way to navigate the space. Rebecca Solnit has identified (for example 2006, 13) the reading of the land as a way to reconnect a



person with the landscape (a skill she believes has become lost from lack of use). As the audience's sensory awareness intensifies, the path can be walked with more confidence: in this way the awakening of the sensory stimulus can be achieved not only through the context of the performance but also in relation to the location. This is likewise experienced in black box studio works, where 'walls' are created using different barriers, such as partitions or black cloth fabric, to create a one-way path through the space. By similarly reading the space, for example, by tracing one's hand along the cloth surface, the audience can easily find their way through the darkly lit spaces of the performance.

### **The Caerdroia in focus: *Art Included***

My first experience in the Caerdroia came at a performance held as part of a training event, *Art Included*, in March 2009, supported by the European Union's Youth in Action, scheme. Audiences of immersive theatres often refer to the difficulties of recounting their experiences to others, partly because of the personal nature of the performance – either in choosing a way to navigate these works or where the experience occurs between one performer and one audience member (one-to-one) – but especially due to the difficulty in articulating and describing the personal meaning behind each sensory encounter and the subjective narrative that emerges. Like other immersive performances, s.l.t is perhaps best understood through direct encounter. Nevertheless, descriptions can be helpful in articulating an impression of the encounter. The performance is put together within the audience's mind after the event, not necessarily in the order within which the scenes are encountered, but in a sequence that makes personal sense from their assembly of the experience. In the Caerdroia, the forest creates a spectacular backdrop to the performance, adding its own sensory impressions,

feeding into the atmosphere and narrative. At different points, the air feels warm and close, in others a cool breeze flows freely through the space, as the path traverses up and down the side of the hilltop, taking the audience in the direction of the valley below or toward its crest.

The following is a brief description of *Art Included*, by Brioc<sup>viii</sup>, which he both performed in and directed:

Caerdroia was, for a period, used as a training ground for practitioners in s.l.t. The, by then, experienced local community would stage a performance at the site for the international trainees who would in return, at the end of the training, reciprocate with an s.l.t performance of their own. Often these community performances were ad hoc night-time adventures, with the labyrinth path quite scantily populated with the inhabitants [performers], whom in s.l.t we call gatekeepers. This can often lead to audiences having quite a lengthy period of walking alone in the dark before coming upon the next instillation, which we call sensory portals. It is in between sensory portals that audiences get to feel intensely that sense of being alone and lost and to witness that often frantic effort of the mind to construct meaning: an effort which ideally and often to great relief is abandoned and replaced with an encounter with what Aldous Huxley called ‘the mind at large’.

I recall on this particular performance, because of the shortage of gatekeepers, many serendipitous encounters between audience members. In s.l.t, which more often than not involves audiences going on a solo journey through the labyrinth, this is not ideal. But the lost audience members encountering and supporting each other through the ordeal in this instance added an extra dimension, where no one was sure where the performance began and ended. The question arises whether immersive theatre ever ends (Brioc personal communication, 2017).

Brioc’s narrating of the performance mirrors with my own remembrance of the experience; out of season, the path was due maintenance to tend the natural barriers

between each coil of the path. As a result, I found myself lost only a few minutes into the performance. I came across the person ahead of me who had themselves become lost, and together we walked through the forest only to arrive at one of the later scenes instead of the second, having cut through the forest. We retraced our footsteps and came across a third disorientated person, before being rescued by a fourth, who was an experienced s.l.t performer, who guided us all back on the path. As a result, I did regularly catch the shadowy back of the person ahead of me, or saw them at a scene before I myself encountered it, but it did not take away from the powerful effect of the experience.

Performances at Caerdroia usually begin before reaching the path, with a short mini-bus ride from the bottom of the valley to the Caerdroia, on a route that winds back and forth across the side of the hill, the lights from the nearby town slowly disappearing through the thickness of the tree blanket. Once arrived for the *Art Included*, performance, we disembarked and walked through a tunnel of fabric, then were seated in a semi-sheltered yurt warmed by a crackling fire. We watched quietly as a red hooded figure appeared at intervals, selected a person to begin their journey through the labyrinth, and led them away. It felt an age until it was my turn, a little over halfway through the group of 14 or so waiting. Once away from the firelight, she told me a tale in Welsh from which I glinted fragmentary word and phrases. This was an intentional decision, as it was anticipated that few from the training would be able to fully comprehend the narrative being offered, shifting our focus instead towards body language, tone and gesture. After a short walk, I was left to continue alone, with nothing but moonlight and stars to guide me. Immediately I felt thankful, it was not a cloudy night, as there is little light pollution in the area that might aid in navigation.

After my brief off path escapade, I arrived with my companions at the second 'scene', where the performers separated the four of us and wrapped us individually in blankets, enfolded and rocked gently to a hummed tune. This simple experience was both powerful and tender; having been lost and disorientated, the performer's touch and gesture communicated that I was safe and that whatever challenges I might encounter, there would be someone near at hand to help. I was reluctant to leave this space, but, moving on through the performance, walking alone in the forest became an act of joyful discovery and delight rather than fear, relishing the periods of silence except for my own feet crunching and grinding against the earth below.

I walked up what appeared to be a river of silver, lit by candlelight toward the sound of guitar music and a recital for one. I ran through the forest with a brightly dressed figure carrying a light up colourful wand, pointing out the stars above. A shape in the dark lit a match and appeared in colour for a fleeting second, before walking with me in the darkness for a brief time. A floral speckled character in a gown, shoes and wig invited me into a game of dress up, helping to costume me in a set that garishly matched her own. Here, I was taken back in my mind to raiding my childhood dressing up box, a frivolous and amusing activity. I witness my own personal viewing of a miniature puppet show that has my laughter peeling through the forest. In a tiny wooden hut, I am given a cup of hot tea that steamed in the near blackness, a delight amid the cold late night air outside. At the end, I am asked if there is something that I want to leave behind, signified by throwing in to a reed pond a branch I have been gifted along the way to use as a walking aide. I hear a deep splosh as the branch that has guided me through a portion of my journey, lands somewhere in the darkness. These are just some of the fragments that I remember, that describe the actions, but perhaps reveal little of their potency and the after effect of this experience.

Although less populated than usual performances, each scene of the training performance maintained the simplicity of the interactions usually afforded in s.l.t. The characters feel entirely formed and fully inhabit the spaces within which they reside. This emerges whatever the narrative or context of the work. For example, in 2011's *Eco Panto*, which utilised well-known pantomime characters alongside an environmental theme, each scene felt equally at home in its location as in the *Art Included* performance. In both instances, the spaces did not directly inform the scene, but use geological or interesting features of the space which are incorporated. For example, a flat top area with a view over some of the forest, provided space for a large four poster bed for Sleeping Beauty's character to remonstrate her lack of sleep from worrying about the environmental state of the world, as she gazed out across to surrounding wall of trees. At the end, of the *Art Included* performance, reunited by the yurt fireside with fellow travellers, we spoke in hushed voices comparing our experiences as we each saw fit to assemble and relay them, different moments having resonated for each of us. This decompression space acted as an important final space, half in and half out of the performance, allowing a slow and gentle return to reality and a chance for the encounter to be shared. The decompression space is an important feature of Brioc's work, acting as a buffer between performance and 'real-world'.

### **Alternate contexts for performance**

As a practice, s.l.t has been taken across the globe by Brioc, training a discrete network of companies and practitioners. Though this paper gives primary focus to the Caerdroia in North Wales, it seems prudent to acknowledge their use in other venues and contexts.

For example, in England, a European Union scheme funded by the Grundtvig programme saw museum and heritage staff from across the EU form part of a pilot course held at Manchester Museum in 2012, led by members of organisations previously trained by Brioc<sup>ix</sup>. This was followed by a weeklong training programme in Bucharest, Romania<sup>x</sup>. The focus of the workshops was on the use of s.l.t in heritage institutions to provide educational benefits. As part of the training, participants were guided on a citywide labyrinth through Bucharest about the city and its people. Following this experience, Catherine O'Donnell (Engagement and Events Officer for the People's History Museum), created a Christmas themed s.l.t performance in the People's History Museum, Manchester with freelance creative practitioner Emily Capstick. In April 2013, the People's History Museum received funding from the Arts Council England for a project called *Play your Part*. The project aimed to inspire 'activists of the future' (O'Donnell personal communication, 2015) creating an s.l.t performance with four members of the public, themed around the 1880s, linking to the Fabian Society's connections to the building. The group spent half a day taking part in archival research to link the performance to the museum and a further day exploring s.l.t methodology and sensory games. O'Donnell then went on to create *Play Your Party* (2014), where the audience explored the museum's galleries whilst being led blindfold. The majority of responses from the visitors after the performance were positive commenting: 'such a vivid experience', 'it really made you think', 'letting go of yourself', '[I enjoyed] the drama and sense of choice'. Only one visitor commented that it 'wasn't for me' (O'Donnell 2014, n. pag). These comments resonate closely with those left by Brioc's audiences: 'I didn't want it to end', 'space for noticing myself', 'it is an experience that will resonate in my memory for the rest of my life'<sup>xi</sup>.

Following my first short workshop in s.l.t, I attended a weeklong training and performance event with a number of companies from EU partnering countries sending practitioners to learn about the s.l.t methodology, many of whom were looking to use or were using s.l.t to explore work with disadvantaged communities from their home regions. *The Lost Child* (2009) performance took place in the remote village of Piodão, Portugal. The audience consisted largely of young people from a second-chance education establishment that had previous experience with s.l.t practice within the school, which housed some of the initial training sessions. In this performance, metal signs placed along the route marked the way through the complex arrangement of narrow cobbled streets through this village on the mountainside (see figure 2 below). Here, the story did not emerge from the cultural history of the village, rather the geological shapes and buildings inspired the sensory interactions and the journey created through the streets of the village. For example, a narrow channel on top of a wall became a playful paper boat race, whilst a series of washing lines were used for a game of hide and seek, dashing back and forth between laundered items. On one of the ledges further up the mountainside and into the orchards on the periphery of the village, two performers created a large-scale puppet which the audience encountered from the ledge below, lying down to gaze upward at the apparently magical figure.

*[Figure 2 about here]*

Considering this work within the broader frame of immersive practice, it is worth noting some of the monetary aspects to this work. Whilst scholars such as Adam Alston have critiqued the potential for ‘co-optation’ of immersive theatre ‘by a neoliberal market’ (2013 p.128), ticket costs for s.l.t have remained relatively

inexpensive, with prices at £10 for a standard ticket at the last Caerdroia performance, *Fear*, in 2014. A recent performance *Mae Gen i Go* (2017) working with young people's charity GISDA and a Caernarfon regeneration programme (STAMP), and performed by young homeless people from the area, was ticketed at £3. This is in stark contrast to criticism (such as Adam Needham's (2017) comments) levelled at Punchdrunk's recent £110 ticket price for *Kabbeiroi*, and contrasts with Teatro de los Sentidos's recent reperformance of *Ariadne's Thread* in Barcelona ticketed at €25. Whilst the performers in s.l.t are often unpaid volunteers, the community and applied nature of much of this work provides key enrichments for individuals who take part and are deeply impacted in being involved in the training, rehearsal, and performance process. Equally, emphasis is on supporting future projects, for example profits from Theatr Dan y Coed's work covering travel and sustenance costs for performers and funding future performances. As the cost and funding of some immersive performances has been considered problematic, this work provides a shift away from some of the gentrification concerns aimed at other immersive theatre companies, and provides a financial accessibility for audiences that is more readily aligned with the community and applied context for much of s.l.t's practice.

## **Conclusions**

Whilst the literature on immersive theatres is flourishing, the vast majority of scholarly attention to date has focussed on companies and practitioners working in major cities who have established a strong identity with reviewers, audiences and scholars. Although this paper does not specifically address the debate between immersion and site-responsive practice (which warrants an article in itself to engage with this important question), it is important to acknowledge the nuance required around



these terms when thinking about practice that takes place beyond the urban centres and some of their strengths and limitations. For example, in offering new ways to consider our engagement with the rural landscape and disrupt the familiar ways in which we may walk and interact with these kinds of spaces. Equally, they bring up a number of challenges around inclusion for both performers and audience in navigating complex terrain and in the lack of public facilities to hand when performing or visiting a site like the Caerdroia.

In considering the work of Vargas and Brioc, this paper extends this scope to consider immersive practices beyond the major UK municipalities. It re-connects Enrique Vargas as one of the inspirations for this (and potentially other's) practice, into the current dialogue taking place around immersive theatres. In drawing upon some of the literature on immersive theatres, it joins Brioc's s.l.t, within an understanding of this body of work and provides an extended historical framework through which to relate a wider understanding of immersive practice, particularly through acknowledging the wider rural, community focused profile of s.l.t, opening up further contexts for critical consideration.

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## Figure caption titles

Figure 1. The plinth marking the entrance to the Caerdroia, Gwydyr forest, Llanrwst.

Figure 2. Painted signs mark the performance route through the village for *The Lost Child* (2009).

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- <sup>i</sup> Enrique Vargas, who I will refer to later in this paper, described experience as “something that enables you to make an external journey into an internal journey [...] this is really transcendental experience” (Christie and Gough 2003, 96).
- <sup>ii</sup> Howson 2015, offered the first discussion of slt alongside Punchdrunk and other popular forms of immersive experience.
- <sup>iii</sup> The Centre for Performance research archive does not list the 1996 performance, although the records are acknowledged as incomplete.
- <sup>iv</sup> Teatro de los Sentidos’s website lists this event under their company’s work (see Teatro de los Sentidos, n.d), however, the Centre for Performance Research’s (CPR) performance archive records it as Taller de Investigación del Imagen Teatral (see Christie, Gough and Watt 2006, 305).
- <sup>v</sup> With thanks to Dyfan Roberts for sharing with me his personal account of the performance and for his permission to use it within my research.
- <sup>vi</sup> Accordingly, Caerdroia were popular in Medieval Wales as turf labyrinths made by farmers, a tradition which faded out leaving no remnants imprinted on the landscape.
- <sup>vii</sup> This performance is described in further detail in Howson 2015.
- <sup>viii</sup> With thanks to Iwan Brioc for sharing his experience of *Art Included* and for permission to share it here.
- <sup>ix</sup> With thanks to Catherine O’Donnell for sharing her experience with slt in Manchester and the audience evaluations from *Play your Party* (2014) and for permission to share this in my research. The project can be viewed here: <<https://erasmusplus.org.uk/grundtvig-projects>>.
- <sup>x</sup> The training was held in a number of EU cities – more information can be found via the following links: <<https://www.facebook.com/Labyrintheme/>>; <[http://issuu.com/lucianbranea/docs/labyrintheme\\_handbook\\_for\\_trainers\\_56f1b56ccb557d](http://issuu.com/lucianbranea/docs/labyrintheme_handbook_for_trainers_56f1b56ccb557d)>; <[http://issuu.com/lucianbranea/docs/labyrintheme\\_handbook\\_for\\_trainees\\_58aa0908800d17](http://issuu.com/lucianbranea/docs/labyrintheme_handbook_for_trainees_58aa0908800d17)>.
- <sup>vii</sup> With thanks to Catherine O’Donnell for sharing the evaluation from *Play Your Party* (2014) and for permission to include it in my research.
- <sup>xi</sup> Audience feedback from *The Millennium Labyrinth*, Fishguard, in 2000, included in the feasibility report for the construction of Caerdroia (19).