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Immersive worlds: an exploration into how performers facilitate the three worlds in immersive performance

Sarah Hogarth, Emma Bramley and Teri Howson-Griffiths

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This research considers the notion that the immersive performance event consists of three worlds – the *fictional*, the *now* and the *imaginary* – and how an understanding of the qualities of these three worlds, in particular the *now* and the *imaginary*, are instrumental to a performer's training in creating immersive theatre. To do this, the research draws upon facilitation techniques from applied drama, mapping some of the fundamental skills required from a performer making immersive theatre that has yet to be articulated by the field. It argues that the use of core facilitation skills such as rapport, listening, reading micro gestures and effective questioning, can be used by the performer to effectively manage the demands of the *now* and the *imaginary* worlds. To illustrate this, the paper examines a creative training day with recent graduate drama students from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and students from the Community Drama degree at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA), as well as drawing upon the authors' collective experience of creating and performing in immersive theatre. A key insight from the training day was for student/performers to gain an understanding into the audience members' experiences in immersive performance and how this consideration impacts on the performer's practice. The findings are significant for companies, directors and performers interested in utilising immersive theatre to inform the creation of immersive work.

Keywords: authenticity, participation, senses, immersive, facilitation

Introduction

The emergence of immersive theatres as a prominent contemporary arts practice invites an examination of the skills a performer requires to effectively manage the various invitations to participate in immersive performance. This paper will add to the current literature in this field by discussing in detail performer training in this area. In particular, the research will make a connection between

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the facilitation skills used by a performer in applied theatre (described below), and the skills required from a performer in immersive performance. Substantive arguments have been made about the audience's experience in immersive theatres, as well as the features and the mechanics of an immersive theatre event (see Alston 2013, Frieze 2016, Heddon *et al.* 2012, Hill and Paris 2014, Machon 2013, Reason and Molle Lindelof 2016). The rich contributions concerning the work of Adrian Howells (1962–2014) (Heddon and Johnson 2016) have opened up discussion of the performer's role within immersive performance. There is now the possibility to build upon this foundation by giving space to emerging voices which are investigating the intricacies of this practice in relation to the performer's creative process and the training they require. This is particularly pertinent considering the attention given to audience agency and the ethics of participatory modes of performance. Both Rancière (2009) and Bishop (2012), for example, provide detailed discussions on the frequent limitations of the audience's involvement within a performance, which is often directed towards a certain response that benefits the narrative. This paper focuses on giving performers an understanding of the importance of agency within an immersive performance. It also presents some of the skills a performer needs to manage audience participation by creating opportunities for meaningful invitations.

The following discussion will argue that the use of accepted core facilitation skills from applied theatre practices such as: rapport, listening, reading micro gestures and effective questioning (which are later discussed in relation to Lyn Hoare (2013), Michael Balfour (2016) and Kay Hepplewhite (2016), can be used by the performer in immersive theatre to effectively manage the demands of an active participant – where the audience is involved in the performance either through verbal dialogue and conversational exchange, or through an internalised discourse triggered by the conditions of the performance. There are companies using both applied and immersive techniques (such as Punchdrunk's enrichment programme, Spare Tyre's *The Garden* and the work of Wildworks), but nothing has, to date, been explicitly written on the crossover in techniques from both practices and how this impacts upon the skills of the performer. This is unsurprising when we consider the work of Augusto Boal (2002), who's arsenal on the Theatre of the Oppressed included the use of the senses within his process of demechanising the body – the senses being a key aspect in the creation of immersive performance. This paper addresses this and in doing so offers an original contribution to this field. This is interrogated by examining a creative training day that we (SH and EB) developed for 11 recent graduate drama students from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and students from the Community Drama degree course at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA), to specifically address this question. All the students had experience of creating immersive performances on their undergraduate courses and were interested in further honing their practice. The training day allowed us (SH and EB) to draw upon our shared and separate experiences of creating immersive and applied performance to devise a series of activities to explore how facilitation skills can support the performer to manage participation within the immersive frame.

Our work

It is useful to begin by describing the kind of work we create together as All Things Considered Theatre. Based in Liverpool, the company was founded

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in 2013. The team comprises of two directors (Emma Bramley and Sarah Hogarth), sound designer Stephen Hull, writer David Coggins and visual artist Louisa Brown. The company has created a wide range of immersive projects, including one-to-one audio performances – *Pram Talks* (2016) and *Rose and Geoff* (2014) – where audio instructions guide audience/participants to co-create their experiences together.

The company has also developed immersive performances for four audience/participants to experience simultaneously with one to one encounters (between one audience member and one performer) embedded within the journey(– *Tomorrow Night* (2016) and *Most Things are Quiet* (2017). Here, the audience was invited to take on specific roles whilst interacting with numerous characters to generate the performance dialogue.

As a company, the work is focused on socially engaged practice utilising immersive performance features, such as an appreciation of place, sensory engagement and audience participation. These works have covered diverse topics from early motherhood to male suicide. The company's approach to immersive theatre fits with the predominant view of these types of work as 'experiential' (Machon 2013, p. 22), meaning that the performance is less about an exterior narrative and instead is focused on the audience's journey and experience of the performance. As Alston (2016, p. 244) notes, it is 'A practice … where participating audiences are frequently invited to interact and move within installation-like environments'. This is a style often recognised in the works of well-known companies such as Punchdrunk and dreamthinkspeak, where non-theatre spaces (such as warehouses or heritage buildings) are transformed to create the 'world' of the performance. For All Things Considered, it is usually every day, familiar spaces, such as public parks, pubs, a car, a house and city streets, that form the setting of the performance.

The performances use varied modes of participation that are a noted feature of immersive theatres, for example: 'multi-sensory simulation; the encouragement to seek out something or someone; the playing of a role (either clearly specified or ambiguous); dialogue; interaction; and the performance of tasks' (Alston 2016, p. 244). In particular, All Things Considered Theatre performances focus on the audiences senses: what they see, touch, smell, taste and hear, which give an immediacy that invite the audience to be present 'in the moment' within the performance. It is influenced by the characteristics of the one-to-one form and in particular how it allows the audience:

> To collaborate (to greater or lesser degrees) with the performer so that the two people create a shared experience – responsive and dialectic as opposed to imposed and prescribed. Participation in the performance event often triggers spontaneity, improvisation and risk – in both parties – and requires trust, commitment and a willingness to partake in the encounter. (Zerihan 2009, p. 3)

It is this key 'dialectic' of the audience and performer meeting and engaging with one another in the performance and how the encounter frames the effect of the performance, that is the focus of the training described here (and this essential engagement which informs the use of the term audience/participant in this paper).

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At the heart of the work of All Things Considered is an invitation for audience/participants to share responsibility with the performer for the unfolding narrative; to fill the openings created within the performance with their responses, thoughts, actions, words, memories and confessions which become the 'aesthetic material' of the performance (White 2013, p. 9). This is crucial to the company's interest in exploring how stories connect with the audience and how both performer and audience might collectively tell them. In this way the audience are an essential part of the storytelling of each performance, drawing upon their rich wells of personal experience which informs the directions of the narrative which is both responsive and flexible to the input of the audience.

Since 2013, the company has built upon and consolidated a methodology for creating immersive performances. This approach includes an understanding of immersive performances as having three worlds – the *fictional*, the *now* and the *imaginary*. The *fictional* is concerned with character and narrative; the *now* world refers to public moments of participation; and the *imaginary* refers to the private connections made by the audience/participant during the performance, such as invoking memories.

Although focusing on how performers utilise and manage the three worlds, it is helpful to briefly frame the role scenography plays in immersive theatre. In scenography, objects, props and set design provide parameters for the drama that help the audience make instinctual connections to guide their understanding and framing of the work. For Machon (2016, p. 31), 'the event must establish a unique "in its own world"-ness, which is created through a deft handling of space, scenography, sound duration and action'. In this way the space informs the audience's encounter, setting an atmosphere or tone that supports the unfolding narrative. It provides signifiers (such as objects and props) that give context and insight for the audience to discover. In the work of Punchdrunk, for example, the space is a performer, where the scents, visual objects and tactile textures tell a story of their own, whether or not performers are physically present. David Shearing (2017, pp. 140–141) has discussed how 'self-reflection and self-awareness forms part of a participant's encounter with scenography [… where] the audience's embodied position activates the art experience', making it a personally felt encounter. For performers, this is an important aspect to consider, in realising how the audience might be experiencing the work and to know that they are not the only storyteller within the work: the space and environment are also feeding the audience's interpretation. This is exemplified in the senses exercise described below which demonstrates the importance for performers to consider scenographic content within their work.

We shall now describe in detail each of the worlds and outline why these are important for performers to consider in their practice.

The three worlds

The *fictional* world refers to the constructed world of the theatrical experience which the audience/participant is to be welcomed into. It provides the context for the participants' experience through carefully considered aesthetics such as sound, lighting, set and dialogue. Within this we also include

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the construction and performance of character. It is a space that performers understand and are familiar working within its frameworks and parameters. This world is to some extent predictable because the overall narrative is pre-planned, meaning that the interactions often take place within a structured timeframe. There are often consistent markers for the performer to work through, for example the routine of foot washing in Adrian Howells' *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2009) provided a broadly similar experience for the audience that was bound by the time limit given for each person's one-to-one encounter. For the performer, the fictional world relies upon skills gained from actor training such as the creation of character and how they imagine, convey and communicate this to an audience. This can be rehearsed in the same way as a conventional play; the performer needs to remember cues, the handling of props, blocking, and creating and communicating a character or persona.

The *now* world is a liminal space that we saw as drawing upon Hethcote's considerations of creating opportunities for participants to exist in a 'lived through' experience that is happening 'now' (Taylor 2016, p. 27). Once the invitation to the audience/participant is given, the content shifts from rehearsed material into improvisation. The direction of this is dictated by the uniqueness of the audience/participant. The performer responds to the verbal utterances of the audience/participant but must also pay attention to body language and often what is not said or uttered. In the context of immersive theatre it is both the rehearsed and improvised content that become the 'lived through' experience for the audience/participant. There should be fluidity between the rehearsed and unrehearsed to avoid breaking the performance and removing the sense of immersion. It is the performer's responsibility to manage the flow of moving between these two modes.

The *now* world is a space that often challenges the performer and from our experience is where performers find themselves most tested; this world is fluid and unpredictable. It is here that applied facilitation skills are useful because this world involves the moment when the audience/participant *becomes* the content provider. It is the performer's role to support, draw out and empower the audience/participants' potential to contribute to the performance. It is this act that creates the possibility for the audience/participant to be affected by the performance; collaborating within the performance space in a meaningful exchange that has been referred to as the transformative potential in immersive theatre (White 2013).

The imaginary world is a space that resides within the imagination of the audience/participant. This is a place of memory or reflection which can be provoked at specific points within the immersive experience, in particular during moments of participation. In the work of All Things Considered, the senses are used as a trigger for personal connections with the material. For example, in *Pram Talks* (2016) a number of audience/participants commented that hearing a baby heartbeat monitor on the audio track instantly took them back to the birth of their own child, providing a point of connection with a personal memory. At another moment, the audience/participants were invited to drink tea and eat toast as a number of voices on a recording talk about their first meals after giving birth. Here, the recording places the audience/participant at a particular time in their life, whilst the tea and toast

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act as a sensory prompt as the meal and drink most often given post labour. As one audience/participant related after the performance: 'when we were given the tea and toast I was taken back right there to the best tea and toast I've ever had in my life'.

Whilst active in the *imaginary* world, audience/participants can be both present in the action, answering questions or even performing a task and at the same time reflecting upon their own world experience, knowledge and understanding. This is often difficult for the performer as it relies upon reading micro gestures from the audience's body language and recognising when the audience/participant might be lost in thought and memory which may be either positive or negative. In these moments the performer should recognise and give time for the audience/participant to experience this world and verbally and non-verbally support them through moments of recognition, so that they feel they are not alone.

In the company's experience, performers usually have an understanding of the *fictional* world and how to manage this – for instance, maintaining a character and improvising dialogue. However, managing the spontaneous and unpredictable participation that occurs in the *now* and the *imaginary* worlds is often more problematic. This needs rigorous attention to prepare actors for engaging with audience/participants within this form of theatre through understanding the audience's perspective in experiencing these worlds. This is addressed below in relation to the 'opening the worlds' exercise. By gaining a personal insight into the sense of vulnerability and the feelings and reflections created by this work, the performer is better prepared to facilitate interaction within the performance.

To support performers in the management of these two worlds we are constantly referring to and borrowing from the core facilitation skills we have come to recognise in applied theatres such as: drama in education, community drama, theatre in education (TIE) and classroom practice. Like immersive performance these practices also expect the performer/facilitator/workshop leader to manage the needs of a *live* audience/participant and it is these skills that underpin the methodology we have developed. We shall now discuss some of the exercises used in the training day to facilitate this learning.

Opening up the worlds

The training session began with a simple senses exercise which involved blindfolding and guiding the student/performers through a range of sensory experiences; smelling soil or TCP, having someone put a plaster on them or experiencing a hug. As Machon (2013, p. 75) has noted, 'awakening and engaging the fullness and diversity of sensory awareness is a central feature of immersive practice', because it enhances the performance's visual cues and supports the storytelling through creating a multi-sensory narrative. We were particularly interested in experimenting with smell and touch as both senses have the capacity to conjure up personal memories (Banes 2001), or transport the audience/participant to a different time or place. The various scents and touches were carefully selected to focus the student/performers' imagination on the theme of childhood from their own historical and cultural

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experiences to evoke personal memories. This exercise offers an experience that enables the student/performers to understand how the *imaginary* world can be accessed and prompted. By placing the student/performers in the vulnerable position of audience/participant during the exercise, they gain an insight into how an audience/participant may experience the *imaginary* and the *now* worlds. We asked the group not to speak during the exercise and to notice if any of the sensations resonated with them, and then facilitated a discussion of their experiences. The student/performers now in the role as audience/participants were invited to respond. As they reflected on the different senses and the various stimuli, we (SH and EB), now in the role of facilitators, questioned them further on what memories were provoked. We employed techniques such as using a soft vocal tone to ask purposeful, considered and structured questions that were designed to tease out their memories and attached emotions. In these moments the student/performers were held in a place of memory whilst also sharing with the group. They existed within the conversation of the *now* world happening in the room, but they were also still present within their own memories, in their *imaginary* world. One student/performer commented: 'the smell of wet dirt reminded me of creating mud pies in my back garden when I was young', whilst another stated: 'the physical contact of the hug was very maternal and reminded me of my own mum and how she would take care of me when I fell off my bike'. This demonstrates how personal and unpredictable the connections and reactions can be.

As part of the training it was important that the student/performers acknowledged that audience/participants bring to the performance their own set of values, morals, personalities and personal histories (Heddon *et al*. 2012, p. 130). These will directly impact on the tone, pace, tempo and dynamics of the performance.

The student/performers brought to the exercises an understanding of conventional theatre and how an audiences' reaction and mood can influence a performance – 'their attention is felt by actors and affects the experience of the performance' (Harpin and Nicholson 2017, p. 1). A good stage actor will recognise if an audience is disengaged, listening for signs such as shuffling in seats, groans of disapproval, or silence where there should perhaps be laughter. They attempt to adjust the performance accordingly, for instance changing the pace or the energy of the scene. Here, the stage actor is generally relying on their listening skills, as the physical distance between actor and audience in conventional theatre makes it difficult for the actor to see the exact details and nuances of an audience's response. The senses exercise demonstrates how this divide is removed in participatory performances (such as applied and immersive) where the performer and audience share the same space and meet face to face. In the exercise above, working in close proximity allowed the student/performers to observe their peers and the fleeting signs of when the *imaginary* world can be activated within immersive theatre. One student/performer talked about how the smell of coffee instantly reminded her of her friend; a small smile flickered across her face, her eyes were cast downwards and she spoke to the group from a place of reverie. Through this example we drew the student/performers' attention to the finer details of the participant's reaction: her smile and the twinkle

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in her eye showed that a personal connection had been made. In response, one student/performer noted the importance of 'giving the audience time to think', recognising that the audience/participant needs space and time in the *imaginary* world to enable them to create content and draw meaning; 'this ability to allow space and time to respond to the unknown and the unplanned can be seen as a key characteristic of good facilitation' (Hepplewhite 2016, p. 176). It is crucial that the performer/facilitator in immersive performance is alert, gauging the right moment to allow the pre- or unconscious observations of the audience/participant to become conscious. This led to the next exercise, where we investigated the importance of reading the various tones of the audience/participants' reactions and how this influences the student/performers' in-the-moment response.

Reading, responding and flexibility

The next exercise involved the student/performers creating a fictional world titled *The Sleepover*, which is the name of the company's next performance, currently in development. The group were split into three and asked to focus on creating a narrative and characters, considering how they could use the props provided, which included quilts, blankets and pillows, to create an environment for the performance. The student/performers drew on their conventional theatre training – devising plots, creating moments of tension and developing character relationships. Using a conventional theatre setting we shared the performances, all of which had clear atmospheres, familiar characters and narratives that belonged to childhood and teenage sleepovers. Next, the student/performers were asked to remove the physical distance that conventional theatre allows in order to consider how the audience/participants could enter the *fictional* worlds they had created. Here the student/performers were required to move away from the safety of the rehearsed scenes towards the spontaneity of an open narrative performed with unpredictable audience/participants. We suggested they place the audience/participants in the role of the *sleepover guest*. We discussed with the student/performers the importance of clear instructions and transparent invitations to participate; if the audience/participant does not understand the rules of engagement it is difficult for them to fully participate. As Jorge Lopes Ramos and Persis Jade Maravala (2016, p. 169) have stated, 'if we cast audience members in specific roles and give them permission to participate and we contract a dramaturgy which is audience-centred, they will both surrender to and actively participate in their own customised and memorable experience'. Paying close attention to the earlier senses exercise, the group looked at creating space in the fictional narrative where audience/participants could make internal/external connections with the potential for confessional opportunity with the student/performers. With these set restrictions the groups focused on the initial invitation to participate and the various degrees of control and responsibilities they wanted their audience/participant to have. One group placed the audience/participant in the quieter role of the *witness*, observing the action and internally making connections. In contrast, the other two groups invited the audience/participants to work alongside them to improvise the performance dialogue based on the audi-

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ence/participant's personal experiences of sleepovers. In response to the senses exercise each group considered the use of objects as a way of placing the audience/participant in the present moment or to unlock private associations, such as a sleepover rucksack and soft toys. The groups shared the first three minutes of their performances as a way to analyse how they managed the live exchange with the audience/participant. What follows is Sarah's experience of one of the performances which we have specifically chosen as it highlights the skills of reading, responding and flexibility in practice.

> **SH**: Outside the performance space a performer hands me a rucksack and helps me put it on my shoulders. He then looks me in the eye and addressing me as if I am a child he says 'so Sarah this is your overnight bag is it?' The look in his eye tells me it is and I am willing to believe this, so I nod my head. He smiles and playfully says 'you know you're only staying for one night? It looks like you packed enough for a week'. With this he opens the door to the performance space and tells me to 'have a nice time'. I go in. I can hear voices hidden under a quilt whispering and giggling. Do they know I am there? I feel exposed and unsure of what to do. In this moment I am transported back to my childhood, and unpleasant past emotions of feeling left out. I am caught in the *imaginary* world of my memory, which has been triggered by the *fictional* image created by the student/performers. The performers pop their heads out of the quilt and bark 'What's the password?' I freeze. Caught up in the sensations of my childhood memory, I am unable to think of an answer. They shout again 'What's the password?' My focus is starting to come back to the here and now of the performance. I say the first word that comes into my head 'Pasta'. 'No', they say and again shout 'what's the password?' My mind goes blank; I am starting to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. My teacher/director instincts are telling me to stop the performance. Then one of the student/performers calls out 'It rhymes with Belly'. I find out later that this line was improvised in the moment. Without hesitation I answer 'Jelly' and with this a hand grabs mine and I'm pulled under the quilt. I feel a sense of relief and I have a smile on my face, I got the question right. In this moment they gain my trust. I know that although this performance might challenge me emotionally that I am in safe hands and I will be taken care of.

In this scene it was clear from the outset that the audience/participant was being invited to play their younger self, indicated by the use of language and tone of voice by the performer outside of the space. The student/performer used direct eye contact to allow him to check in with the audience/participant, to read their reaction and to gauge if they understood, as Hill and Paris (2014, p. 44) put it, 'a contract is set up in the eye contact that takes place in an intimate, proximate performance'. Once in the performance space the rules of engagement were less obvious, there was no student/performer present to tell the audience/participant what to do. This, however, was a deliberate decision made by the student/performers. In separating the audience/participant from the performers, who were hidden giggling under the quilt, they wanted to experiment with the alienating qualities this provided. However, the student/performers were not prepared for the impact that being left alone and unobserved would have in terms of transporting

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the audience/participant to the *imaginary* world of the performance. In the discussions that followed the performance, the student/performers were surprised at how powerful the initial image of seeing the group under the quilt was for several audience/participants. On reflection, they had not considered how absorbing the invitation to play your younger self might be and how it instantly opened up a personal dialogue for the audience/participant. Here, we referred the student/performers to their personal experiences of the senses exercises, reminding them of how immersing a personal memory/thought/feeling can be, and how it can transport you to a different time and place. Although the student/performers had missed the signs that the audience/participant was immersed in the *imaginary* world, they were tuned in with what was happening in the *now* world and they had all recognised that the audience/participant was struggling to accept the invitation to improvise. One student/performer stated: 'I was looking up at the audience/participant, I could see clearly that her cheeks were flushed, she looked scared even, I wanted to make her feel better and that's when I came up with the line 'it rhymes with belly'. Here the student/performer was using what Balfour (2016, pp. 153–159) describes as 'social instincts', applying the skills used in everyday life when socially interacting, such as listening, watching, sympathising and empathising. Bringing her humanity into the performance space, the student/performer was driven by the need to make the audience/participant 'feel better'. She abandoned the pre-planned structure of the performance and created a new invitation to participate. As the scenario was based on personal experiences of childhood, the student/performer had a strong understanding of the themes and content being explored in the fictional world. This pre-knowledge and awareness of 'programme content' is a key characteristic of facilitator training (Hoare 2013, p. 147). Facilitators in theatre in education, for example, are expected to research in detail the issues of the performance in order to respond appropriately to the live dialogue with audience/participants. This insight and knowledge of the *fictional* world is an essential part of the immersive performer's preparation. Understanding the *fictional* world allowed the student/performer to respond appropriately in the moment, by offering an easier question, one that was childlike and playful, in keeping with the *fictional* world the group had established. It might not always be the case that the performer has a personal connection with the fictional world or the subjective experience of the audience that is informing their encounter. In these instances, like the applied performer they would need to research and consider potential responses to the performance.

Rapport and questioning

Finally, we moved beyond the initial invitation to participate and considered how the student/performers might maintain the audience/participants' attention. Here we referred to the importance of rapport, the ability to develop 'a trusting relationship that invites honest participation and dialogue' (Hoare 2013, p. 146). Establishing rapport involves a genuine connection between performer and audience. However, creating this authenticity in the space can be difficult when a performer is playing a character and the audience is play-

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ing themselves. This is particularly challenging when the performer is inviting the audience/participant to reveal something personal; there is an imbalance of power in the performer–audience relationship. To combat this disparity we asked the student/performers to consider how they might maintain a character whilst also bringing their personal traits quietly into the space, using eye contact, humour, charisma, sensitivity and touch to move the participation beyond a mechanical repetitious experience to one that is subtly personalised. What follows is a description of one of the performances from the training day. We have chosen to discuss this performance as it invited the audience/participant to share personal confessions and demonstrated how the student/performers used rapport and effective questioning to create an authentic connection that enticed the audience/participant into sharing.

The student/performers were in role as young teenagers and placed the audience/participant in the high-status role of the *Auntie* – the knowledgeable one, who is able to offer advice to the less informed younger girls. We (SH and EB) observed the performance whilst one of the student/performers acted as audience/participant in the role of the *Auntie*.

> The *Auntie* was welcomed in to the bedroom with enthusiasm. It was clear that the two student/performers were playing very young teenagers; busy doing each other's makeup. One of them gently pulled *Auntie* into the space and asked her to help her apply her eye shadow; the brush was thrust in her hand, her task was set. As she applied the makeup the performer talks about being pretty, how makeup can make her look pretty, how they (her and her friend) were not eating carbs, how she doesn't have 'boobs' yet. Then, there is a quiet yet certain interjection from the other student/performer who leans forward, lowering herself ever so slightly, turning her head to the side inquisitively and asking 'how old were you when you got boobs?' *Auntie* laughs 'Thirteen', she answered. This is followed by 'Have you got a boyfriend?' *Auntie:* 'Yes'; performer: 'do you wear make up for him?' *Auntie*, without hesitation: 'No I wear it for myself'; performer: 'The fit boys in our school only go out with girls who wear make-up and have big boobs'. *Auntie* appears concerned. Performer 'How old were you when you had your first kiss?' *Auntie*: 'Twelve'; performer: 'Twelve, wow how did you know what to do?' Thrown for a moment, a smile crept across *Auntie*'s lips and her eyes appeared to be searching for something. The performance ended with *Auntie* sharing her personal story.

Both student/performers established a rapport with the audience/participant the moment they entered by taking them by the hand and guiding them safely into the space. The student/performer looked them directly in the eye, smiling and casually touching them as they sit together on the floor. This allowed a relationship of intimacy to slowly build between the performer and audience/participant. The consideration to touch supported the audience/participant's ability to be present by making

'an individual alert to *being* in the moment and highlights *praesence* within the immersive event … A reciprocal, sensual relationship is established between the self, the space, other bodies in that space' (Machon 2016, p. 35; italics as in original).

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These non-verbal actions put the audience/participant at ease, making them feel included and valued, but also helped to activate the *now* world by placing them in direct relation to the performer. Beyond this, interaction provides the potential points of connection for the imaginary world to be stimulated.

What happened next was significant because it clearly demonstrated the different approaches that the two student/performers took to manage the rapport, where one specifically took on the role of facilitator. We observed the one student/performer utilised her acting skills – connected to the themes of the performance, she offered a truthful character; she was a confident improviser who skilfully suspended disbelief. She engaged the audience/participant with her casual and fact-based questions, such as 'what's a carb? Or: 'do you like my eye shadow?' The audience/participant was enjoying the conversation, which was playful, friendly, charming and largely risk free. In contrast, the second student/performer was sitting back, her focus on reading the audience/participant. She waited, watching for the right moment to ask the question: 'How old were you when you got boobs?' This altered the tone of the performance, moving the dialogue from sharing knowledge to sharing a personal experience. The discussion shifted away from the realms of play and in the direction of a unique conversation reliant on the audience/participant's input.

Often moments of participation are based on questions; the skill of the performer in immersive performance is to present these questions as honest and spontaneous, despite being scripted. Both student/performers presented their questions as if it was the first time they had asked them, responding organically to what was happening in the space at that very moment and with that specific participant. Without this sense of authenticity in the space the audience/participant would be acutely aware that what they were experiencing was a rehearsed performance and the questions asked solicited of every audience/participant, destroying the sense of intimacy. Although playing characters, the student/performers were able to bring themselves and their life experiences into the space to inform and develop the dialogue with the audience/participant. There was a genuine commitment from the student/performers to be present in the moment allowing a realistic dialogue to unfold by giving the audience/participant space to speak, listening and responding to their words. For an audience/participant to open up and disclose, there has to be a level of trust with the performer – sensing that they too are invested in the moment that is shared and that there is a process or journey of discovery happening together. The performer's ability to respond in the here and now, to work directly with what is offered, to be present but not to dominate, to be able to coax, to challenge and encourage an audience/participant to take risks with them, is essential to the creation of this theatre.

On reflection

The training we offered the students took place over one day exploring some of the core ideas presented here in terms of the relationship between applied theatre practices and interactive moments within immersive thea-

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tre. What became clear within each exercise was that whilst the students did not have the facilitation skills required to effectively facilitate moments of participation initially, they were able to pick up and engage with both the practice and the pedagogy quickly, drawing upon the skills that they had developed during their performer training, in particular their ability to improvise, to be spontaneous, to accept and not block the responses the audience/participant gives, which allowed them to build effective rapport. The student/performers all expressed how important they had found the opportunities to experience the exercises in both performer and audience roles. They found that although they experienced the role of the audience from their own subjectivity, they gained an appreciation of how an audience might feel and express themselves. This allowed the student/performers to develop an understanding regarding building trust and taking risks. This was key to understanding the vulnerabilities involved in being an audience/participant in immersive performance and how the skills explored would allow them to create a safe environment, where audience/participants could openly participate.

Whilst recognising that the art of facilitation is one that takes time to master (as all art forms do), this group were specifically selected having shown an interest in immersive and participatory performance work; they had a willingness to embrace some of the initial value systems that underpin applied work, such as creating meaningful experiences for the participant. They came with a generosity of spirit both to the tasks presented and to the ethos of the work that meant they were able to effectively explore and apply some of the basic tools presented. This highlighted that they were able to bring their own humanity into the space, a quality that cannot necessarily be taught as it is a highly personal attribute that belongs to each individual performer and is a key conclusion of this research.

The exercises discussed are offered for those interested in working with the immersive form as considerations for practice based on a process that has been successfully developed by All Things Considered. The techniques charted in this paper are important for directors, performers and companies making immersive theatre to introduce this methodology and what we feel is an important aspect in shifting the expectations of the performer's role; that is that they are not only playing a character convincingly and telling a story, but managing the complexities of a variety of invitations to participate that requires a different skill base incorporating improvisation, collaboration and facilitation practices. It is these particular abilities that support the performer to be authentic in the moment and underpin effective participatory moments within immersive performance, of significance for recognising the complex capacity of skills required for an immersive performer.

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