

# EXPLAINING A DREAM: WRITING THE SIMULTANEITY OF PERFORMANCE (PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH)

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## Abstract

The language and mind of art-making is about invention; it is flexible and open, it looks for the new in form, in approach, in understanding, in expression, in perspective, in meaning making; it is its own reason to be. The language and mind of scholarship and research has a code to live by, it conforms to standards and principles of codification and fulfils projected outcomes and looks for explication. It works toward demystification and clarification and to uphold a tradition and a system invented with a particular set of intentions. The creative tends to be poly-vocal, while the critical, because of the tendency toward strict codification is speaking one language. These are two separate minds with two separate languages. As practice-based researchers, we have to make our own path, and yet the academic format requires a specified path to be followed. What damage is done to either side when the taint of the other seeps in?

## Keywords

Art-making; language; meaning; creative process; practice-based research

First, a joke:

Two cannibals eating a clown.

One says to the other: Does this taste funny to you?

I'm thinking about the performance (of the joke) and the analysis of it (an explanation of why it is funny). I'm thinking there is something there which is analogous to the relationship between the working practice of art and the analysis or explication of that art.

## Explaining a joke

The explanation of the joke destroys it but the explanation of it clarifies its purpose and proves the mechanics of it. The explanation shouldn't be necessary. The laughter or amusement which results from the telling proves it is working; it is only when it doesn't work that it has to

be explained. But what is explained is the not funny, non-functional version of the joke – if it didn't match up with a knowing laugh, it was faulty. What is now being explained is a fault or a fault is being taken apart, so what is described is not how something worked but rather how something didn't work. Is it what it was intended to be if it needed to be explained? What disappears the more you put your finger on it? What can only be experienced but never described? How is it that a person can use words to communicate? How is it that we can't (because we know that sometimes we simply cannot)?

### **The use of words**

*Making sense:* Every performance work or art work or idea has an internal logic by which it designs its laws. Sense is made in various ways particular to specific forms of endeavour. When Goat Island director Lin Hixson said to Goat Island collaborator Mark Jeffery that it made sense for him to fall to his knees and sniff the floor like a dog, the outside observer would probably be unaware what kind of sense it made. There are several webs of association employed toward the making of sense but among them there may be a kind of sense that is not literal or contextual in an intellectual way. The sense it makes may actually be connected with the nervous system or the muscle or the spirit. Saying that something makes sense within a Goat Island composition may not mean it completes a narrative line, there may be a kinetic question that it satisfies without reference to any line at all. It is also true that story content is not the only content and, therefore, there may be a narrative arc in speech and another in rhythm and another in levels of intensity. Each of these arcs and all of the others that run through a life or a performance make sense in their own ways according to their own internal logics.

*Part plot:* When I have used the words *part plot* to describe a mapping of my trajectory through a performance work, I have been instantly misunderstood. Thinking of the word *plot* as in a garden plot, I meant to be speaking of a map, a kind of guide to an area of a performance. The area inhabited by me. But my use of the word *plot* has misdirected the listener toward long-standing rules of literature and meant it was understood I referred to the linear sense or narrative arc of my *part* in the performance.

The meanings of words are not so fixed as we sometimes imagine them. When discussing ideas of making performance work, there are places where the language we share gets tangled as it crosses into other forms or ways of thinking. I have talked about “making sense” and been misunderstood and used the word *plot* to an unintentional redirection of meaning away from my original intent. Context and style certainly helps direct the reader or listener toward the intention of the author or speaker but language is a minefield of misdirection. We can never completely control the meaning of our words once we have released them.

We make meaning with our gestures but the same gesture performed by two different people has two different meanings and if performed in unison by more than one takes on a different meaning and its place in time is also part of the sense that it makes. This meaning can be drawn

out by our favourite theorists and critics but the depth of it can only be felt, rather than explained. It doesn't have a written word equivalent.

I heard the German choreographer, performer, dramaturge, and writer Raimund Hoghe speaking after a performance of one of his solo works. He was answering questions from the audience and he was asked about how it was that he responded to the music he chose in composing his dance performance. "You have just seen the performance. That was it. That was the expression of my response to the music. I am a writer. If I could have communicated it in words, I would have written it." This is the way I feel about performance.

Whenever I'm trying to explain what I do in a performance-making process, part of what I am doing is sending thought from the simultaneity of my dreamy-brain-wave interior state to the linear line of written or spoken language. It changes. The material changes. It goes through a translation or a transliteration. Just the same way a sleep dream is difficult to explain in the few words its duration seems to suggest, a thought can sometimes feel betrayed by uttering it aloud or attempting to write it down.

It takes a lot of explaining because the simple experience of thought within the confines of the mind is clear without explication. Or we think it is. There is a multidimensionality to it as it nestles there with other thoughts and associations and the visual and experiential languages of awarenesses that come with something experienced in the mind. Memories are living next to it. Now said out loud it must be given colour and weight by adding feeling and visual information equivalents. These equivalents in speech might take a long time to compose. They might be poetry. They might be flowery or fanciful. They might not feel like reality laid bare but more like a kind of construction.

Sometimes I am criticised for exaggerating parts of a story when retelling it, but I feel that what is lost in not having been there at the time in which the story took place must be made up for by amplifying parts and creating suspense and tension in order to recreate a sensation that could only really be experienced in real time but which can be mimicked or translated by using "artistic license" in the retelling.

When I do this I do not feel I am lying or giving a false impression but am in fact finding ways to be true to the original which defy or exceed the plain facts but which supply what has been lost in the distance between the event reported and the report of the event. There is some of that distance to contend with in the transport between truthful reporting within the mind and outside of the mind.

The language and mind of art-making is about invention, it is flexible and open, it looks for the new in form, in approach, in understanding, in expression, in perspective, in meaning making; it is its own reason to be. It looks to illuminate questions and to see how many answers it can find.

The language and mind of scholarship and research has a code to live by, it conforms to standards and principles of codification and fulfils projected outcomes and looks for explication – unfolding carefully to reveal the various parts and how they fit together. It works

toward demystification and clarification and to uphold a tradition and a system invented with a particular set of intentions.

The creative tends to be poly-vocal, while the critical, because of the tendency toward strict codification, is speaking one language. These are two separate minds with two separate languages. As practice-based researchers, we have to make our own path and yet the academic format requires a specified path to be followed. I think time will tell whether this conundrum ever settles into a solid common practice. To me, it appears to be fluid and volatile and not altogether reliable or comprehensively articulated. It is largely still within the threshold between two schools of thought, one highly standardised and one resisting standardisation.

### **My particular filter**

For 20 years, I was a member of Goat Island, a Chicago-based collaborative performance group until the group disbanded in 2009. Work with Goat Island encompassed a large part of my formative, post-higher education performance career. Members contributed to the conception, research, writing, choreography, documentation, and educational demands of the work. We performed a personal vocabulary of movement, both dance-like and pedestrian, that sometimes made extreme physical demands on the performers and attention demands on the audience. We worked historical and contemporary concerns into text and movement and used a language of visual and spatial images. We placed our performances in non-theatrical sites when possible and always attempted to establish a spatial relationship with audiences distinct from the usual proscenium theatre situation. We researched and wrote collaborative lectures for public events, and often subsequently published these, either in our own artists' books, or in professional journals.

My current London-based company, Haranczak/Navarre, continues my focus on methods of collaboration; our first project has been a series of duet performances in which the two people involved determine together the starting place, the duration of the making process, and the style and content of the work.

Collaboration invites the inclusion of multiple voices, and exercises the ability to involve divergent viewpoints. I am using collaborative methods in support of practicing restraint, tolerance and flexibility in responding to difference. In collaborative processes we are looking for multiple answers to the questions we pose. We are not hoping to find just the one answer that, we hope, fits all circumstances. Part of collaborating is allowing influences at play in the world around us to affect the direction of the work we make. So we amble around for awhile trying and testing where we are in relation to each other, our surroundings, and our current interests and with the material that we bring to the moment.

### **Variability in understanding the uses of research**

During work on one of Haranczak/Navarre's duets, a linguist who studies directorial and rehearsal speech asked to come and observe our interaction in the studio while we worked to compose

the performance duet we were in the middle of making. Our making process took place over a year and a half in concentrated periods of studio time punctuated by sometimes months-long breaks from the work. When she visited our studio, it was for a few days in a row at the start of a working period, so she saw us getting reacquainted with each other and with our material. Her method was to videotape our working sessions and then to pour over it dissecting the communication between us into what she identified as parts of our speech. In a spirit of inclusion she showed us some of the clips she had identified and a chart of the kinds of emblematic phrases and fragments of speech she had used to categorise our tacit communication tactics. This was revealing to us in that it made us aware of how a linguist might parse our words and showed us some of the ways we acted upon one another both to influence and to make sense of our work. As we two duet partners considered it the work of the linguist, we needed nothing more from it. We weren't moved to employ this information consciously as part of our working method. We probably intuitively felt that systematising our communication might be counter-productive. We never actually spoke about putting this new information to work in our process of collaboratively composing performance material.

The three of us appeared together at a performance-based symposium showing brief video clips from our working process that had been identified as characteristic parts of our speech and therefore parts of our working method. The audience of mostly academic dancers and performance-makers were mystified. Again and again members of the audience reformulated what amounted to a single question: how did you use this to *do* something?

The linguist simply wasn't answering the question no matter how it was re-stated. For her, the naming of the parts of speech *was* the work and it sufficed. On the other hand, the academic audience seemed to express that from an artistic or creative point of view; it was as if we'd received a set of colours and never painted with them. For the linguist, the importance was the *identification* of the paints – and like the first human beings who gave names to the animals around them – this was understood to give a new clarity and a sense of agency. There is an action in identification. But, insisted practice-based researchers in the audience, from the creative-making point of view the work is yet to be done. Yet, for the linguist, if a stream of expression is never parsed and named and analysed, there is no data. It is all rushing water with nothing to catch it.

### **Artist residencies: Practice-based research**

In 2015 I undertook a couple of week-long residencies in the performance laboratory which used to exist at the University of Roehampton's Department of Drama, Theatre, and Performance. Research is a state of mind. Setting up a residency is setting up that state. Ideally, a residency takes place in a dedicated spot, a spot where those involved, in each of these cases, two people, can set up an atmosphere dedicated to the work we hope to do. It is a container for what might come. We didn't know in advance what shape the work would take, so we were careful to keep the remit

somewhat expansive. The studio atmosphere needed to be without distraction and yet somehow open to contamination. It needed to be stimulating without being overwhelming. It needed to be quiet enough for listening but with something to listen for.

A residency places us in a context offset from our usual habit. This newness is engineered to unlock routine and find possibilities in a shape becoming ours while we attempt to inhabit it. It is a place to be a tourist and see with unaccustomed eyes. It is a brand new outfit that requires us to reconsider our parameters. It is a break and a hollow place, it is a cradle and a bridge, it is a state of mind and a solid shape.

Practically this meant work in the studio open to observation by students and staff for 5 to 6 days followed by a public-facing presentation for the community of Roehampton's Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance. The two residencies in 2015, one with theatre-maker Chris Goode and the other with artist and filmmaker Lucy Cash were part of Haranczak/Navarre's duet series and functioned as a testing process for decisions regarding possible duet partners; a sounding out of the alchemy between us at that point in time. As if we were testing the air and the pressure and the air pressure.

In addition to the work of composing performances each duet functioned as research into methods of collaboration without a single director. Duet partners shared in defining the working process, the schedule and overall timeframe, and methods for generating material. We were seeking to avoid hierarchies in decision-making, and we were using duets as a direct form of collaboration with no majority rule and no mitigation between points of view.

In five days we were able to turn what might happen into what did actually happen giving ways to understand how we might be able to design a working process that would tune in to how we two best work together.

It's hard to know before you start on any given week how much is going to be possible in that time. Sometimes the work comes faster and sometimes it goes slower or maybe it's always the same speed but the result is what varies or the perception of the result, or the apparent value of the result. Sometimes the result is elusive. Sometimes the result soaks in over time. So I suppose the result depends on what happens next between us and how we process what happened between us on those five days in the studio. When it was over, we had to measure up a former possible future with the one that began to come into focus as we spent time working together.

Why open rehearsals? Why deliver progress reports? Is this simply to conform to an academic set of requirements? I think that in composing something that would be acceptable to the institution we also constructed circumstances that gave us a set of mechanisms (the necessity of performing the unready, the pressure to self-assess, answering questions or explaining ourselves in unexpected ways) for guiding our studio experience, and which we could use to help clarify what we were finding and how we were doing that, and this helped bring into the forefront of our minds what it was that we were doing.

The first of these two residencies began in the week commencing 19 January 2015 with Chris Goode. Because we expected visitors and we thought they might come while we were in the middle of something and knowing we might not want to be disturbed repeatedly and imagining we might find it necessary to explain what we were up to and, in any case, in order to make ourselves feel more hospitable, we wrote a message to be read on the door or picked up from a small pile of printouts:

*Inside this room two people, Chris Goode and Karen Christopher, are working.*

*You're very welcome to come into the room: don't worry, you won't interrupt the work that's going on.*

*They might be talking, they might be staring into the middle distance – whatever they are doing it is work toward making a performance and this is part of a very early stage in that process. When they started on Monday, there was nothing.*

*You can make your own decisions about how you want to be in the room with them; only, be kind. If they're not very responsive to your arrival, don't be disheartened. They're concentrating hard but they're pleased that you're here.*

*They might actually turn from what they are doing and address you directly but in the event they don't it isn't because you aren't interesting or beautiful or worthy of attention; it is because of the work.*

*Before you enter the room, you might like to take a moment to think about what kind of experience you're hoping for, and how you will know if it's happening, and what you might do if it's not.*

*Thank you for being here.*

The visitors at any time were a special event that charged the room with the energy of their presence and with our reaction to being observed (and our feelings, to greater and lesser extent, of needing to serve). At one point there were 17 visitors, a class, who got up and left because it was the end of class (and they'd received a signal from their tutor that leaving was now possible). This occurred while we were in the middle of doing something. And, fair enough, they weren't our prisoners; we were showing something precisely because they were there but it was our work to be getting on with which we should have been doing anyway. It was our job to do this. And while they were leaving and I was doing the "scar belly" dance and Chris was reading "a list of things to be punished by a night in the box", I was thinking: this is interesting, this is kind of good, it's a good time to leave – but I didn't take that thought very far. A few minutes later I walked down the hall and the tutor for that class was somewhere there and I said, "You picked a good

time to leave”, and she said, “Oh sorry!” (assuming I was being sarcastic), but no, I meant it. It seemed that to convince her that I meant what I said, I had to say why I thought it had been a good time to leave. I heard myself say: Because if the audience leaves during that dance, it is as though the dance never stops, it is still continuing even as they wait for the bus or have a chuckle round the corner or check their phones to catch up for the next thing. Maybe it doesn’t stay with all of them or even with many of them but the possibility existed that, even just for one of them, the dance continued and the continuation of it resonated. And this is precisely why you want to be visited and contaminated by your visitors during a creative process because in communicating with others you make clear some of your own thoughts. Or you have observations that push forward into your consciousness rather than lingering dormant in the back of your mind. And it gave me a way to end a piece that hadn’t begun. This ending might never be used but these flashes create a climate of small opportunity spikes and these build a sense of hope and this makes a confident foundation for trying things. And everything is not always perfect and sometimes I really need to be left alone to work but there is benefit in the tumult that comes with the leakage of other people into the creative atmosphere we are trying to create when we are trying to pull a performance out of thin air.

During the second of these two residencies, which took place in the week commencing 16 February 2015, with Lucy Cash, Lucy and I misunderstood each other several times about very fundamental parts of what we were doing. But taking the long view, our focus was on making material, and these moments simply continued to propel us toward what we were aiming at. Like walking robots who are designed to walk via a series of stumbles and tumbles, thus surmounting the robot’s most difficult obstacle – the pitfalls of perambulation – we agreed to consider the mental stumble, the thought stutters, part of how we communicated with each other rather than a sign of its impossibility.

Normally, we conceived or composed a performance directive and then followed it. But in front of an audience of observers, as a result of something I said (we aren’t sure what), Lucy produced this sequence in reverse. I performed an action and then she pronounced a directive. After watching me make a river on the floor by pouring a bottle of water in a curvy line, Lucy looked at me with a thoughtful expression and pronounced: “Using gravity, stick water to a surface.” I was surprised. Surprised is good. There is potential in surprise, and humour.

Everything we mentioned or focused on acted upon us – even the incidental played a part in how we activated the ideas in the room. There was a large abandoned water bottle in the room. I removed it in the morning only to retrieve it later when I needed a river. The students watching said: “You didn’t worry about the part that didn’t work, you just found another approach, you didn’t stop to dwell on that, you just kept going.” Seeing this had allowed them to identify something that was stymieing their own process in the studio causing a loss of confidence and a lack of forward progress. Without stalling from inertia in the face of a failing plan or a misunderstanding, we changed tactics and, drawing from a chain of events set in motion by every single thing that had happened earlier that day – like the water in a river bouncing from rock to rock constantly changing direction

but nonetheless continuing to move – we carried on attempting to pull performance material into the here and now. We hadn't noticed the switch they were talking about and now the students were teaching us what we'd done.

### **Methods of opening and closing**

I knew a woman with mental health problems who would check herself into a hospital when things got bad and spend a lot of time painting – she was not a painter by training but she found it useful as a way of talking to herself – painting intuitively with abandon and later looking at it to analyse it, diagnosing or reading her own condition via what and how she had painted.

Perhaps it is not so uncommon to be able to hop in and out of points of view but it helps to be conscious of this action and the code switching it requires. And it means understanding there are languages other than the language of words, including a language of experience. I always think of speaking and experience as separate actions with separate goals and divergent languages. Divergent because they go in different directions.

Anyone who stares at a blank page or screen or internal thoughtscape and begins to string a line of words together knows that a new space is created, a new truth, a new point of view, experience, consciousness – when an art process is the subject of this reflection, it stays in its own world, intact – the only mixing that occurs here is when the making and the reporting is done by the same person and that mix may only live in the mind or it may find a way to contaminate either the art or the analysis – is the mixture useful? Should these two languages/worlds/intelligences remain apart?

What damage is done to either side when the taint of the other seeps in? Does my reporting of what happens in my studio ever make sense to an academic? Does the academic who interviews me and writes up her notes reflect my work or hers? Does it matter if I don't agree with her conclusions? Does it mean she hasn't understood my work or that I haven't understood hers? Is it possible to exclude any of the questions or any of the answers to them?

Does the experience of another ever make sense in the context of a stranger's inner landscape?

Can we ever trust and invest with importance or value something which cannot be expressed in words?

If we all hear the same music and each of us is moved by it, what happens when each of us begins to explicate our experience of it?

If the joke isn't funny to half of the room, can the other half explain what makes it so funny to them?

Can a colour really be described sufficiently?

Like dreams, which always fail to be fully captured in waking speech, does the simultaneity of experience or sound or the performance of bodies in space resist linear description? And does this mean it will never be fully possible to explicate the making processes involved in the practice of art? It doesn't bother me if it is as difficult as tying a knot in a rope of water.