

[S1]

Harm's Way Revisited:
Reflections in Digital Spaces
At The Crossroads of Theatre-Making and Pedagogical Practices
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[S2]

My doctoral research explored models for collabowrighting through digital media, while defining playwrighting practice as curatorial. The practice project involved producing an interactive and immersive play, *Rumi High*, as a literary playtext, which led to the creation of what I name a 'hyper(play)text,' exploring methods for playwrighting by way of web design, locating the site of reading and writing plays to a digital space: www.RumiHigh.org. Developing the hyper(play)text transformed my playwrighting practice in a variety of ways. [S3]

My notion of writing expanded to 'wrighting,' where graphics, typography and performance itself, are considered types of text. The play form brings these texts together to engulf the reader in a combination of sign systems. Sight and site became integral to playwrighting, as digital spaces for creating and presenting material opened new opportunities for collaboration across a wider network of contributors. Expanding upon the notion of performance-as-writing, and bringing new art forms into my practice, the process of developing *Rumi High* as a hyper(play)text incrementally increased the work's collaborative potential, where developing can be viewed as curatorial. Considering Patrice Pavis' Postmodern notion of "*contamination of practice by theory*," where "theory generates practice," my doctoral thesis presented itself as a model for practice-led researchers, exhibiting how critical reflection intertwines creative practice and theory (Pavis, 1992: 71-72).

The structure of the written thesis demonstrates an approach to critical reflection that emphasizes the interrelationship between case studies and practice, expressed through a detailed discussion of decisions and choices in relation to practice, at both micro and macro levels.

Considering the conference theme, 'WRITING' this paper presentation emerges from an introductory overview and outline for a proposed book, which explores the relationship between practice-led research and pedagogy, related to theatre-making practices. In an attempt to reactivate my own personal performance archive, the book will survey and reflect on fifteen years of performance documents: production books, journal entries, reviews, lesson plans, teaching archives and academic papers combined with personal memory and interviews with relevant collaborators, to explore and formalize the notion of a critical reflective practice towards a meaningful set of outcomes in practice-led research. The relationship between artistic practice and writing, in the context of academic research, is a challenging and much debated topic. Increasingly, academics whose methodology involves practice, are required to produce a surplus of documentation-as-data, in order to legitimize a form of knowledge production which is experiential, multisensory and not always best articulated through traditional academic writing formats. The book will offer a blueprint for connecting theatre practice, vis-à-vis the residue from both process and product, to a reflective writing practice that provides an approach to articulating practice-led research to practitioners and non-practitioners alike. The book will explore various approaches and writing styles for critically reflecting on artistic practice in order to suggest that critical reflection can be achieved in a writing practice that artfully combines different registers: personal anecdotes, interviews and

close examination of documentation materials from both process and product.

Through the book's theoretical underpinnings, a series of exercises, tasks and teaching tools emerge, framed by annotations with specific reflective moments from that chapter's case study. The aim of these sections is to guide young practitioners to provoke artists to borrow, steal and adapt the proposed methodologies to their needs. [S4]

In June 2007 I was hired by Vital Theatre Company to help form Brooklyn Theater Arts High School, a new 'small-school' conceived around a mission of theatre arts integration. At that time, in response to the "epidemic" of large high schools in NYC,

Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his chancellor Joel Klein, applied business principles to overhaul the nation's largest school system... They reorganized the management of the schools, battled the teacher's union, granted large pay increases to teachers and principals, pressed for merit pay, opened scores of charter schools, broke up large high schools into small ones, emphasized frequent practice for state tests, gave every school a letter grade, closed dozens of low performing schools, and institutionalized the ideas of choice and competition (Ravitch, 2010: 69).

The 'small-school movement' was predicated on the belief that large urban high schools were to blame for the decline of the public education system. The solution was to divide these large school buildings into several small mission-based schools. Brooklyn Theatre Arts was part of this movement. During my four years teaching and developing curriculum on the fringe of the NYC public school system, I began to imagine and develop a play that would critique the public education system through satire. That play, *Rumi High*, became the centre-piece for my practice-led doctoral research, which located me in London, England, where my teaching portfolio expanded into the U.K. Higher Education system.

Ironically, as I completed both the play and the research project, my experiences working within UK Higher Education began to mirror, and perhaps heighten the Kafka-esque world that I was satirizing in *Rumi High*, where bureaucracy, corporate 'lingo' and cookie-cutter approaches to management steadily began to supersede all pedagogical principles, perhaps most drastically in contrast with approaches to teaching and developing skills in the arts. Considering the current state of academia in the UK, it appears that the notion of reflection, where close analysis and critical thinking, requires substantial time devoted to serious thinking and considering, is a radical position to take. A formalized approach to a critical reflective practice, as the book aims to provide, will be necessary, not only to legitimize the work that we do as artists, but to deepen and develop new creative work, and the practice itself, alongside cultural trends in the 21st century, where digital sensibilities both advance and hinder the creative practices.

In developing *Rumi High*, I maintained a network of international collabowrighters who contributed to the 'wrighting' of the work through Skype video rehearsals and discussions, as well as an online forum (established through a Facebook group page) where an on-going digital dialogue amidst a stream of shared contextual material stimulated the process. I have since taken the approaches used in developing *Rumi High* to continue developing new work, and reflecting on past works, in the interest of designing and implementing curriculum in the arts. Today, I will be highlighting aspects of how digital media enables a reflective practice, and how an ongoing reflective practice that engages the residue from both process and product can help to establish the work as a model of practice and a teaching tool.

I will be using newFangled theatReR's 2007 production of Mac Wellman's *Harm's Way*, for which I was the director. [S5]

Mac Wellman's 1978 play, *Harm's Way* is the story of Santouche's anti-heroic journey through a world plagued by anger and impulsiveness. newFangled theatReR initially produced the play as part of the FRIGID NY festival, in its inaugural year. Their production was honored with the FRIGID Audience Choice Award, which led HorseTRADE Theatre Group, the producing organization for the festival, to partner with the ensemble to produce a revival co-production, for a month-long run later in the year.

The reason that I have selected this particular work to discuss today is because of a fortuitous moment of synchronicity where my teaching, my artistic practice and my research forged a crossroads. At the University of Bedfordshire, *Staging New Writing* is an optional unit for Third-Year Theatre and Performing Arts students, focused on the studying the work of contemporary playwrights, and developing strategies for directing, performing and designing these 'non-traditional' playtexts. Mac Wellman is one of the playwrights studied on the syllabus. The final project requires students to form companies around common interests in writers and styles, and to select a one-act play to fully produce, (within specific guidelines and creative limitations). One of the companies, Group X, chose to work on *Harm's Way*. After approving their project proposal, I told the students: '*You've picked some delicious poison. If you engage deeply with the process of analysing and staging this play, my experience working on Harm's Way will be an asset to your process. If you don't put the work in, it will be far too easy for me to call you out on your negligence.*' I wondered if that comment was a bit too blunt, and fraught with falsehoods.

That evening, I returned home, and began gathering various archival documents from the newFangled productions, most notably the video archive of the second version. I began to view this material, not for nostalgic purposes (although such sentiments will inevitably creep in at times), but to investigate how my archives from almost ten years ago, might be of use to my students. How might my own personal archives of past projects become teaching tools? [S6]

The archival documents from the newFangled productions of *Harm's Way* included:

- Video from the revival production
- Photographs from both productions and a Summer 'Lab' Workshop Series
- Two Director's Production Notebooks (each including Prompt Script, research materials, rehearsal plans, notes and reports, schedules, ground plans, marketing materials, reviews, etc.)
- Journal entries spanning both processes

With the exception of the Production Notebook, all of these archival documents were stored digitally. Mayer-Schonberger, in his book *delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, refers to digital storage as “a powerful, versatile, and fast extension of our human memory” (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009: 77). He further asserts that, “digital memory offers us a strategy of continuity and preservation to transcend our individual mortality. It lets us leave behind traces” (91).

While the photographs and video were an obvious first point of entry, and easy to access and share with my students, they were predominantly product-oriented and lacked the contextual details that help to understand how we produced the work. The students were hesitant to view the video footage, as it would risk the temptation to copy what their tutor had produced.

The Production Notebooks, however, included insight into the structuring of the process, as the schedules, rehearsal plans and notes proved to be a curious residue, to be de-coded and analysed in new contexts. [S7]

The Production Notebooks offered many pathways; information to access additional materials such as specific journal entries. For example, the schedule enabled me to identify specific periods of time that I was likely to be writing in my journals. [S8]

My journal writing practice is marked by a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ approach, which manifests into a variety of forms of writing from poetry to memoir, reportage to list-making, songs to letters. As a discipline, I aim to write a minimum of thirty minutes daily, which to date, spans seventy journals dating back to 1997. These journals, which I refer to as ‘books’ compose an ongoing work titled, *Cranology*. These journals exist as a set of composition notebooks, which combine to form an on-going work titled, *Cranology*. These books exist in two forms: in their original state, a set of black-and-white marble composition notebooks with handwritten passages marked with date and time, and a ‘copied’ state, each page digitally archived as scanned images. Mayer-Schonberger suggests: [S9]

By drawing or writing, we capture an event, an emotion, a thought. Looking at our own drawings or reading our own words aids us in remembering, making it possible for us to recall more, and do so more accurately. Used this way, external memory is an extension of our own human memory. External memory can also be used to facilitate the construction of shared common memory... acts of (re)construction” (28-29). [10]

I recalled having met with Mac Wellman prior to the start of rehearsals for *Harm’s Way*. I had a vivid memory of where we met, and some of the things we discussed.

I was certain I would have taken notes at this meeting, but there was no evidence of this. The rehearsal schedule indicated a date when Wellman had met with the company in rehearsal, but I knew that I met with him prior to this. The scope of the search narrowed. I consulted my iCal, and scrolled back to 2007 at the start of the rehearsal process, hoping that I might have entered my meeting with the playwright. There it was: 23 February 2007/ Mac Wellman. This led me to skim through *Cranology Book #26*, but there was no entry on that specific date, or the following dates. I returned to the Production Notebook, looking more closely at the rehearsal notes which were in chronological order. There they were: [S11]

Notes written on scraps of paper from a scratchpad, folded behind the rehearsal notes from that particular week. I had missed them on the first survey of the book. On the fourth panel, the notes read: “*Anger Emotion in Search of an Idea Angry Confused.*” I recalled that one of the key pieces of information from that meeting was Wellman’s advice to “work against the violence of the piece,” and to play it as “softly, slowly and gently as possible.” I will return to the importance of this advice later. [S12]

In this next section, I will walk the reader through some of the prevailing discoveries that emerged from this multi-modal reflective process, which led to a rediscovery and re-articulation of aspects of the teaching and learning that have been embedded in my designing of the curriculum for the *Staging New Writing* unit. The archive opened new pathways to how I might anchor their learning through staging *Harm’s Way* to specific lessons and exercises that highlight the core principles of the unit. I will discuss how the Director’s Programme Note, the company’s ‘Post-Mortem’ notes and *Cranology* activated my pedagogical approach to guiding the students on their project and more broadly, in the unit. [S13]

The Director's Note that I had included in the FRIGID NY festival programme begins with the following statement: "*I find our society to be in a dangerous place or situation. I am angry. Anger is a product of confusion. Anger is an emotion in search of an idea.*" I was struck by how personal this note to the audience was, as well as its declarative tone. Having already reviewed sections of the Production Notebook, I was aware of the direct reference I was making to my meeting with Mac Wellman. I recalled the inherent anger that the play contained, but I had forgotten my own personal state of mind at the time. I began reading through my journal entries in *Cranology* during this period, which helped to contextualize the period when I had decided to and begun to direct *Harm's Way*. In addition to reflections on rehearsals with newFangled, the writing included expressions of my early forays into teaching (through a Kaplan tutoring programme for low income families), while juggling other odd-jobs (temporary convention staffing). *Cranology* offered a snapshot view of a young struggling artist in NYC, jumping sporadically from tensions and passions surrounding love relationships, family matters, and scattered references to the news, current events and pop culture. What was it about this play that grabbed me, and incited me to bring the newFangled ensemble on a journey that ultimately led to a yearlong exploration of this 1978 play, almost thirty years later?

In the *Staging New Writing* unit, I place a great emphasis on the director's ability to make decisions. Choosing a play to direct is a major commitment: a director will typically be devoting at least two months of his/her life to investigating, exploring and staging this work. This is why, although there are particular frames and limitations for the students in choosing the plays to work on, there is great emphasis on making an informed decision, with consideration with a particular consideration of

what drives and excites them, and why. In the past, I have had students propose to produce plays without reading the full text, having consulted little more than a synopsis found on the Internet. This common classroom occurrence led me to develop the '*Tinder Analogy*,' which draws parallels to romantic relationships, in order to impress upon students the importance of selecting work to stage and produce. *Tinder* is a popular online dating 'app' where the user swipes right or left to accept or reject potential dating partners. These sweeping, 'swiping' actions are quick decisions made from somewhat superficial means; mostly based on a mixture of photographs posted by the individual, and some other basic information, such as age, job and university. A swipe to the right acknowledges a potential, as does a quick Google search, a visit to Wikipedia or browse on Amazon.com when searching for a play. The interest is perhaps one of intrigue, but the swipe right, or the click, is an action made on the surface; not much deep thought or critical thinking. Drawing out the analogy, I explain to students: '*You might go on a date with a 'Match,' but you wouldn't necessarily commit to a two month long relationship based on a quick glance and swipe.*' The comparison is rather simple, but proves effective in impressing upon students the importance of deeply considering what type of play they want to work on; as they will be involved in a relationship with this particular work for the next two to three months. I then suggest the following criteria: [S14]

- excites and interests you thematically, and in tone (*you're pulled in*)
- puzzles and challenges you, (*you're confused, but curious*)
- connects to today's social and/or political landscape (*you've got a hunch that it has a larger meaning that connects to the larger world*)
- you will be able to inspire and rally others creatives around (*you can't stop thinking and talking about it*)
- you can imagine yourself in a room with for several hours, days, weeks, and months at a time (*you won't get sick of it*)

Hayley Bloodworth, the student director for Group X, admitted that she chose to direct *Harm's Way* because "it scared her." She had "no idea what was going on when she read it."

[Slide 15]

At the time of this writing submission: My students have expressed interest in using found objects and researching circus aesthetics to stimulate their process. Initially, their engagement with 'found objects' is low, as they are discussing objects they've seen or have, but they are not bringing these objects into rehearsals to experiment with. Their references to circus are vague, and I am pushing them to engage more deeply with the research process, to truly find what it might mean to stage a piece within a circus aesthetic. Their performance is on 12th May.

When I first accessed the video documentation of the 2nd version, I was perplexed as to why I could not locate documentation of the FRIGID production. I still have not located one, if it exists. In viewing video of the revival production, I was struck by the gentle quality that pervaded and strung together the piece, particularly the transitions in and out of scenes, where the gypsies transform the stage set, with a mixture of singing and dancing that brings us from one extreme to another. My memory had held onto the FRIGID production, which was a bit more rushed and raucous, and pressurized by the circumstances of performing within a tightly scheduled festival. This reminded me of the advice from Wellman; to work against the violence of the piece. My reading of *Cranology* led me to find the plans and notes from the 'lab' sessions, which were designed precisely around this advice. The second version of *Harm's Way* was clearly an investigation and exploration of the playwright's 'slow, soft and gentle' advice. I also found rehearsal notes in *Cranology* where I was writing candidly about the struggles I was having working the actors on

particular scenes. I described strategies that I used in rehearsal that can be tied back to the 'soft, slow and gentle' advice, which I plan to include in the practical exercises section with snapshot excerpts of the journal entries as contextual annotations. [S16]

After my initial explorations through the archive, I decided to expand the reflective process beyond my own directorial process, and began to reach out to the members of newFangled to invite them on this reflective journey. I set up a forum, using a private Facebook Group Page as a digital platform for company members to recollect and share their memories from the process. This enabled me to post and share the documents that I was reflecting on. I also held *Skype* video-conferences with individual members who were interested in engaging in a more in-depth conversation around the work. This began with Niluka Hotaling, who was both scenographic designer and performer for the piece. As I shared my findings from the Production Notebook, she introduced her own notebook, full of design concepts, sketches, renderings and research materials specific to her roles. Both of these methods, the 'forum' and 'video-conference' stem from my doctoral research project where, in developing *Rumi High*, I maintained a network of international collabowrighters who contributed to the 'wrighting' of the work.

In the Post-Mortem notes for the production, Megan Raye Manzi (played ISLE OF MERCY): expressed her struggles with the role and admitted that in rehearsal, she "wanted more specificity from JM and less freedom to explore." Manzi was one of the first members to respond to prompts on the Facebook Forum. She states: "*Now that I'm a mother, I finally understand the ferocious, protective nature you wanted to see come out in Isle of Mercy. Now, I get it. #MamaLionROAR.*"

In this dialogue, I ask her to offer advice to my student, Kate Radley, who is currently grappling with the role. Manzi offers:

I remember feeling a bit perplexed at the seeming contradictions in Isle of Mercy. So I worked to find the "character." I wondered, how does she walk, talk, and feel? What discoveries could I make about her that would somehow connect these vastly different traits all within her?? Skip all that work outside of yourself. Instead, work inward. There is no "character" to be found or made sense of. She is all of us. We are all extreme walking contradictions. She is both the most delicate piece of your heart and the angriest pit of your soul. Play both. Live both. In perfect, messy harmony.

Mayer-Schonberger explains: "As digital culture emphasizes recombining and sharing over owning, people are utilizing the power that digitization offers them" (62). This exchange between my former collaborator and my current student is a pedagogical approach that embraces network building and information (or, experience) sharing; and an example of what Mayer-Schonberger refers to as an "internalized culture of information bricolage" (85).

When I first accessed the Production Notebooks of *Harm's Way* I had no idea how many reflective directions it would off-set, nor the newer initiatives that would be inspired. Needless to say, the field of research, from reaching out to the company members, re-reflecting, and searching for lost archives is time consuming; [S17] Apropos for a research project that, as I suggested at the start, is an act of radical defiance in the face of today's current state of affairs: Critical Reflective Practices, as a deliberate 'slowdown,' in the name of rich art-making processes and meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

To conclude, I would like to share an excerpt from the conclusion of my doctoral thesis, in order to re-anchor today's discussion around digital spaces, in order to reflect, and to look ahead to my next research endeavor: [S18]

Expanding upon the notion of performance-as-writing, and bringing new art forms into my practice, the process of developing *Rumi High* as a hyper(play)text incrementally increased the work's collaborative potential. Interestingly, in the latter phase of production, when my laptop computer became the site for finalizing the details of the hyper(play)text; I was alone, collaborating with machine, rather than human being. In producing a *performance text*, the process usually builds towards a communal experience. In the future, I would prefer to work with a team of web designers, graphic designers and software programmers, to achieve the vision and intentions of the play. As director/playwright, despite a 'DIY ethos,' I am more interested in playwrighting as a curatorial practice that brings together various types of expertise in a collabowrighterly process, rather than developing my own technical facility in web design. While the hyper(play)text expanded my notion of the play, text and the act of playwrighting, I suspect that my playwrighting practice will return to notebook and pen to 'wright' my next play (rossi, 2015: 234) [S19]

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