

THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACE IN PERFORMANCE:

A SURVEY OF SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE

by

JACOB DANIEL ROREM

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Student: Jacob Daniel Rorem

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of Theater Arts by:

Theresa J. May	Chairperson
John B. Schmor	Member

and

Kimberly Andrews Espy	Vice President for Research and Innovation; Dean of the Graduate School
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Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Jacob Daniel Rorem

Master of Arts

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For practitioners and scholars of site-specific theatre, attempts to understand the relationship between a site and performance have often focused on performance. The many ways a site can inform and enhance the audience's experience of performance has been thoroughly explored, but what about the reverse? How can performance facilitate an experience of place and inform audiences about the value and potential of the places around us? I contend that site-specific performance which privileges place—including its varied histories and meanings—can foster a more thorough consideration of the places we inhabit and equip us to make better decisions about them. This thesis uses three case studies to explore the experience of place in performance and its potential implications. My case studies are Rob Ashford and Kenneth Branagh's production of *Macbeth* at the 2013 Manchester International Festival, We Players of San Francisco, and PlaceBase Productions of Minneapolis.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Jacob Daniel Rorem

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Whitworth University, Spokane, WA

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, Theater Arts, 2014, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, Theatre, 2005, Whitworth University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Site-Specific Theatre
Theatre Historiography
Sustainability
Dramaturgy

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow, Department of Theatre Arts, 2013-2014
Co-Artistic Director, Mad Duckling Children's Theatre, 2013-2014

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, Department of Theater Arts, 2013-2014
Marks Family Graduate Scholarship, Department of Theater Arts, 2013-104
Graduate Award, KC/ACTF Region VII Scholarly Paper Competition, 2014

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about site-specific theatre, yet despite many attempts to establish a clear definition for it, it remains “slippery,” to borrow Mike Pearson’s term (Pearson 7). In *Theatre/Archaeology*, he provides his own comprehensive definition:

[Site-specific performances] rely, for their conception and their interpretation, upon the complex coexistence, superimposition and interpenetration of a number of narratives and architectures, historical and contemporary, of two basic orders: that which is of the site, its fixtures and fittings, and that which is brought to the site, the performance and its scenography: of that which pre-exists the work and that which is of the work: of the past and of the present.... Performance recontextualizes such sites: it is the latest occupation of a location at which other occupations—their material traces and histories—are still apparent: site is not just an interesting, and disinterested, backdrop. (Pearson and Shanks 23)

Pearson’s definition “continues to be a benchmark,” according to Joanne Tompkins in the introduction to *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice* (2).

Building off of Pearson, Tompkins emphasizes the interaction between site and performance, noting how negotiations between the two “affect our understanding of and relationships with performance.” She specifically speaks about “the particularities of ‘place’ and its capacity to recontextualize performance, just as performance can reformulate how we perceive and experience space and place” (Tompkins 1).

Many, like Pearson and Tompkins, argue that site-specific performance is defined by a deeply integrated and reciprocal relationship between the site and the performance. Yet many works that claim to be site-specific may be nothing more than “a transposition and modification of stage practices” that brings the theatre to

non-traditional or found spaces—essentially a theatrical version of “plop art” (Pearson 1). What is missing from productions of this sort is any serious regard for place and its value beyond that of scenography. Yet I would argue that the same is often true of productions which come closer to Pearson’s definition. For theatre practitioners and scholars—I count myself among both—attempts to understand the relationship between site and performance have assumed a biased position in favor of performance. Ultimately, performance is the subject of our practice and discourse; the many ways site can inform and enhance the audience’s (and artists’) experience of performance has been thoroughly explored, but what about the reverse? How does performance facilitate an experience of a site and inform audiences about the value and potential of a particular space or place? Accepting that there is a fruitful dialogue between site and performance, what can be learned about site-specific theatre by approaching it from a position which privileges the site as subject? A perspective that sees performance as the means, not the end; where the goal of site-specific work is a enriched sense of place?

I believe it is time for practitioners and scholars to more critically examine how site-specific practices impact our understanding and use of space and place. Beyond the world of theatre, how we relate to place is of the utmost of importance. Site-specific performance scholar Fiona Wilkie notes, “In recent years, many of the most pressing issues of socio-cultural debate have been characterized by questions of place. These include globalization, immigration, ecology, territory...and the changing understandings of warfare now that conflicts are no longer organized according to national borders” (89). How we define the places in our lives—as

public, private, mine, theirs, home, resource, wasteland, paradise, etc.—is significant. Whether a forest, for example, is deemed a resource to be used or an ecosystem to be preserved has consequences—for the forest, its neighbors, and in today's changing climate, the world.

Space and place, and our conceptions of them, play integral roles in our everyday lives. A deeper understanding and more thorough consideration of the places in our lives are critical for negotiating the issues we face today (and will face tomorrow). A more nuanced understanding of the places in our lives will hopefully allow us to make better decisions about them. Simplistic, or singular, conceptions of place can lead to regretful decisions. Returning to the example of the forest, if a forest is understood solely as a natural resource to be exploited economically, clear-cutting could be seen as a good decision. In reality, the forest can have many meanings to many different stakeholders, many of which would be negatively impacted by clear-cutting. The forest can simultaneously be: an economic resource, a place of recreation, an ecological habitat, a protector of water quality, an atmospheric conditioner, a scenic wonder, a science lab, and sacred ground. Understanding the forest as such may complicate our decision-making, but it can also lead us to include more stakeholders in the conversation, force us to consider what is most important, and bring about better choices about forest usage.

Because of its close relationship with space and place, site-specific theatre has the potential to open up our understanding of the physical world around us. It can reveal the layers of history and meaning contained within a site, draw attention to its oft-overlooked details, and create new stakeholders through the performance

event. Site-specific theatre can bring about a more thorough and accurate understanding of the places in our lives which, in turn, can bring about better use of them. In this thesis, I will examine three different examples of site-specific performance and will use site as the primary subject of my investigation. Primary questions which will drive my project include: What is the dynamic like between performance and site? What kind of experience of space or place do these case studies facilitate? What do they teach about the value and potential of the sites in which they perform?

The case studies I have chosen for this project cannot represent the full diversity of practices that fall under the category of site-specific performance. They do, however, begin to articulate a spectrum for site-specific performance regarding the treatment of and relationship with site. First, a production of *Macbeth* co-directed by Rob Ashford and Kenneth Branagh for the Manchester International Festival in 2013. This production is typical of many performances which utilize found spaces, but use a set text and preserve a more traditional theatre experience. The second case study is a company in San Francisco, We Players, which also uses set texts in found spaces, but creates performance experiences which facilitate more active audience engagement with the site. Third, I will look at PlaceBase Productions in Minneapolis, specifically their work in Granite Falls, Minnesota. This young company creates performances in collaboration with the community about the sites in which they perform, using both the creative process and the performance itself to explore and connect audiences with their sites. Since I have not been able to witness these productions first-hand, I will be relying on a variety

of sources for my analysis such as reviews, videos, scripts, company reports, and photographs.

In order to discuss this topic, it will be helpful to establish the definitions of several terms, *site*, *space*, and *place*, in particular. This will allow me to provide a more nuanced examination of the relationship between performance and its environment. Just as there is little consensus regarding the definition of *site-specific*, the definitions for these terms are contested. Though I draw on several scholars and theorists to inform my working definitions, it should be noted that my definitions are *one* way to understand these terms.

Nick Kaye, in the introduction to his book *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, cites two definitions of *site* from the Oxford English Dictionary, a starting point I find just as satisfactory. The first definition I cite is also cited by Kaye, but I have added a second that I find to be useful:

1. The place or position occupied by some specified thing. Freq. implying original or fixed position.
2. The situation or position of a place, town, building, etc., esp. with reference to the surrounding district or locality.

These two definitions identify four important qualities of site: position, permanence, occupation, and reference. To use an analogy, site is like a set of coordinates upon a grid. It is positioned, in that it exists in a particular, discrete location. Thinking geographically, this would be equivalent to a longitudinal and latitudinal reading. Site is also permanent, at least from an anthropocentric view of time. Unlike space and place, site, according to this usage, does not change or evolve—it is fixed upon the metaphoric “grid.” Third, a site is occupied, playing host to “some specified

thing.” This could be a home, a hillside, a performance, an ocean, an action, a performance, a jewelry box, etc.; it is not the thing or occurrence itself, but the location of it—the coordinates, not the point occupying the coordinates. Finally, a site is always understood in reference to something else. We determine where a site using reference marks and other points on the same “grid.”

Site—as a locatable, fixed position—is home to both *space* and *place*. *Space*, as I will use it in this project, includes the physical dimensionality and materiality of a site. For example, the space of a house includes the physical dimensions of the house and rooms, the arrangement of the rooms within the larger space of the house, the materials which make up the house—wood, tile, cement, brick—and the physical details of the house articulated through design and craftsmanship. Space is material arranged within a site, but *place* is the lived experience of that space; “Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning,” writes Yi-Fu Tuan, highlighting the role of human interpretation in placemaking (136). Instead of being defined by physical dimensions and materials, place is created by the building blocks of human experience: memory, history, relationship, use, meaning, and connection. “Space defines landscape,” explains writer Lucy Lippard in *The Lure of the Local*, “where space combined with memory defines place” (9). These will serve as the working definitions for *site*, *space*, and *place* throughout this thesis.

CHAPTER II

MANCHESTER INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL'S *MACBETH*

Any site-specific work engages with both the space and the place of site to some degree, but *how* it relates to them is what is of interest to me. I will begin with Ashford and Branagh's *Macbeth*, a production which is similar to many productions being billed as site-specific today. *Macbeth* took place as a part of the 2013 Manchester International Festival (MIF13) in Manchester, England. It was performed in a deconsecrated church built in 1859, St. Peter's at Ancoats. In 2013, the church had stood unused for decades and had just undergone a massive renovation spearheaded by the Hallé orchestra, who now uses it as a dedicated rehearsal and recording space. *Macbeth* was created specifically for St. Peter's and utilized the inherent qualities of the site, a practice which sits comfortably within present-day usage of the label "site-specific theatre". Two questions will guide my analysis: how did this performance facilitate the audience's experience of the site and how did it inform the audience's understanding and valuation of St. Peter's and sites like it?

First, how did this performance facilitate the audience's experience of the site? As a site-specific performance, *Macbeth* excelled in its use of St. Peter's physical dimensions, transforming the church into a highly effective performance space. It provided an opportunity for audiences to experience St. Peter's, but in limited ways. Ultimately, the production utilized the church to enhance the audience's experience of the performance, not vice versa. It did so primarily by taking advantage of the spatial qualities of St. Peter's, particularly the physical layout

of the church. Within the nave of the church, the production team created a traverse stage bordered on both sides with pew-like, wooden seat boxes. On one end, the aisle-like stage was capped by the apse and on the other end towered the organ loft, clad in wooden slats and transformed into a fortress wall. This arrangement placed the audience in the middle of the action, creating an exciting and intimate actor-audience relationship. In his review, Michael Billington of *The Guardian* writes: “With the audience seated on two sides of a tunnel-like, traverse stage, [the church] has the great virtue of immediacy: we seem to be in the thick of the rain-soaked, mud-spattered opening battles.” Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* writes, “We, the audience...are perched right over the killing fields. The effect is rather like being upfront at a bull fight, where you worry you might get in the way of a raging toro.” Jason Cowley, writing for the *New Statesman*, notes the audience reaction to the intimacy of the space, writing, “Those in the front row visibly recoil as the slain fall or are slammed up against the wooden pews” (49).

Taking advantage of the unique spatial dimensions of the church, Ashford and Branagh—along with their set designer Christopher Oram—created an immersive and immediate theatre experience for the audience. Several design choices magnified the existing atmospheric qualities created by the church space and blurred the distinction between the site and the performance. Like many Victorian-era churches, the interior of St. Peter’s is a long space with high ceilings; its materials—brick, cast iron, and wood—give the church a refined, but rough, industrial feel. Brantley touches on the dynamic between space and design in his review, noting, “Set off by a chancel at one end, where a constellation of votive

candles burn wanly and in vain, this linear stage is a limited space. Yet as lighted...it feels both infinite and claustrophobic, in the way that deep darkness often does.”

Neil Austin, the lighting designer, exploited the volume of the church with his design to create a particular atmosphere for the show. Kate Bassett’s description of Oram and Austin’s choices in *The Independent* highlight how design extends and expands on the church’s rough, industrial materiality: “The nave’s central aisle...it’s been bounded by a palisade of dark planks and covered in peat-black earth—with traverse-style seating. In the apse at the church’s East end, a myriad candles flicker. But at the West end, the organ loft has been converted into a soiled fortress wall, in which the Weird Sisters materialize.” Bassett also notes how the performance sought to blend the action of the play into the existing space of the church; the nave, apse, and organ loft are utilized as playing space, not simply left to be scenographic backdrops.

Ashford and Branagh, along with their designers, wisely took advantage of the existing qualities of the space and used them to enhance their production. The space of St. Peter’s helped to facilitate a specific audience experience of the performance, one not easily replicated in a traditional theatre space. The spatial qualities that were once used to facilitate religious services and spiritual experiences had been harnessed for a new theatrical purpose. *Macbeth* also allowed for an experience of St. Peter’s as a place, albeit in a very limited way. The production capitalized on the previous role of the building as a place of Christian worship, using it to provide context for the action of the play.

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson describes a phenomenon in theatre he calls ghosting, that is, “The ‘something else’ that this space was before, like the body of the actor that exists before it interpolated into a character, has the potential, often realized, of ‘bleeding through’” (133). Choices were made by the directors to allow St. Peter’s previous life to “bleed through” like Carlson describes. Interviews with Ashford reveal that staging the play in a found space, and specifically a church, was intentional (Eberson). Rather than scrubbing the venue clean of any Christian symbolism to create a “neutral” playing space, Ashford and Branagh made use of the church’s symbolism. The stained glass windows of the apse, complete with shepherd’s crook and the keys of St. Peter, remained visible to the audience. With performances being held in the long days of July, the windows were faintly illuminated at the show’s beginning. Lining the back wall of the apse were rows of candles, like votives lit in prayer, some of which were snuffed out by the onstage murder of Duncan (Cavendish). Perhaps most significant was the large cross suspended above the apse, looking down upon the action of the play.

The church-as-symbol was not overlooked by reviewers. In his very short recommendation to see the show, Paul Taylor of *The Independent*, takes the time to note, “It’s a shrewd move, playing on the sense of violation and sacrilege that comes from staging Macbeth in a church. The altar end is ablaze with candles and the wild young witches appear like writhing perversions of the statues of saints.” In her *Financial Times* review, Griselda Murray Brown writes, “High-ceilinged and low-lit, with a cluster of candles flickering at the altar, [the church] is an almost overwhelming setting for a play about sin and the supernatural – as if the place itself

were a character, or force, in the drama.” Alexander Vlahos, the actor who played Malcolm, spoke about the role the church’s history played in the show during an interview with entertainment news site Hypable:

Yeah, the way we’re setting the play is in a church, a deconsecrated church in Manchester. So if you’re doing quite a bloody and blasphemous play in a church, it already has weight behind it. This is an actual church, that – even though it’s deconsecrated – has had countless years, hundreds of years of prayer, in that building. Any time you walk into a godly place or a holy place the walls, you know, you get a sense of history. And we’re doing Macbeth in this place, so the idea of toying with that, toying with good and evil... And then for me, what’s really interesting is how actually good Malcolm is. How godly he is, what he represents in this play. Cause once Macbeth turns into that evilness, Malcolm is the only hope for Scotland. So I’m enjoying the idea of him being quite godly and Christian-like in the play, and we’re exploring all that sort of stuff. (Wilken)

For Taylor, Brown, and Vlahos, the church as a religious archetype, and not simply as a physical space, was a crucial ingredient to the overall production.

The site-specificity of *Macbeth* hinged on the spatial and symbolic qualities of St. Peter’s, a relationship I would argue would more accurately be described as space-specific. The production did not seek to explore or utilize the specific sociohistorical meanings of St. Peter’s, the Ancoats neighborhood, or the city of Manchester. Even though the production spoke to the religious history of the site, it did so to a very limited extent, defining the place of St. Peter’s in archetypal terms. The site-specificity of *Macbeth* allowed audiences to viscerally experience the space of the church, but it limited their spatial experience visually and kinesthetically by restricting them to a traditional, seated, and passive position within the space. Unlike environmental theatre practices which, as Richard Schechner argues, seek to utilize all of a space for use by both actors and spectators, or walking theatre practices which encourage physical exploration within the space or landscape,

Macbeth had clearly delineated spaces for each group and prevented a higher level of kinesthetic engagement (Schechner xxviii).

What kind of experience of St. Peter's did *Macbeth* facilitate for its audiences? It allowed for a sensory experience of the space, albeit one limited by the audience's fixed vantage point and artistic choices which blurred the distinction between the church and the world of the play. The performance did not engage with the layers of place within the church and the event gave audiences little opportunity to do their own exploration of place. Indeed, the tickets for the show did not even disclose the performance location until the day of the show (granted, word of mouth inevitably ruined the surprise for some once the show opened), preventing spectators from knowing much about the church before seeing the show. It would be hard to say that this production of *Macbeth* facilitated a in-depth, productive dialogue between the audience and the site, or among the audience *about* the site.

The production also privileged the performance itself—that is, the story and its themes—over the site. The question of privilege is ultimately a question about who, or what, benefits from site-specific performance. In some works, the performance utilizes the site in order to further its own discursive or artistic goals; at other times, the performance can be used as a tool to investigate the site—as a space, place, or both. It should be noted that I understand that such a simplified dichotomy ignores the complexity and indeterminacy of site-specific work. The “propensity for the boundaries of both ‘site’ and ‘performance’ to slip” in site-specific work is well established, as Tompkins points out (1). Pearson adds that boundaries are not only mobile, but permeable: “Site is frequently a scene of

plenitude, its inherent characteristics, manifold effects and unruly elements always liable to leak, spill and diffuse into performance” (1). In a single production, the relationship between performance and site may shift, blur, change, overlap, or exist on multiple levels, making any claim of a clear established dynamic between the two suspect. However, a full exploration of the interaction between site and performance is beyond the scope of this project. My interest in this relationship is largely driven by the aforementioned question, “Who, or what, stands to benefit from this production?”

Fiona Wilkie, in one attempt to define site-specific theatre, writes, “Simply put, site-specific theatre privileges place” (89). While it is true that site-specific theatre is more concerned with the influence of place than more traditional practices (excepting the influence of theatre architecture), Wilkie assumes that theatre is and should be the de facto subject and ultimate beneficiary of site-specific performance events. To better illustrate, picture a box filled with a variety of objects. If the box represents the broader world of theatre praxis and the objects within it represent various production elements like text, performers, sound, and place, then Wilkie’s statement holds true. Framed as such, site-specific theatre usually elevates the importance of place above other production elements. However, if the box represents the event, or possibly the site, and the objects within represent such things as performance, space, place, and audience, her statement no longer holds true. If we understand the performance itself being one element of the total event, it is often the case that Michael McKinnie is correct when he counters Wilkie:

“Site-specific performance does not always privilege place. Sometimes it uses place to privilege performance itself” (McKinnie 23).

For Ashford and Branagh’s *Macbeth*, the answer to the question of “Who, or what, benefits?” is certainly not St. Peter’s church, its history, or the community surrounding it. Overall, Ashford and Branagh filtered the audience’s experience of the church through the story of *Macbeth*, controlling to a great extent how audiences not only perceived the site, but also how they understood its significance. Rather than allowing the church to stand on its own two legs, as it were, the production redefined the church according to the benefit it had for the performance of *Macbeth*. Ultimately, the production was not designed to draw the audience’s attention to St. Peter’s, or even Ancoats or Manchester, but the story taking place within its walls, a story which is set in Medieval Scotland. The primary subject of the event was the content of the performance. The production functioned like a traditional theatre event, privileging the artwork (that is, the performance) and relegating the site (St. Peter’s) to the roles of building and scenography.

Michael McKinnie would describe this production as “monopolistic performance,” a category of performances “that seek to appropriate place wholly within the apparatus of the theatre event and produce value through doing so...” (23). MIF13 appropriated the church for a new purpose to great success: a sold out run, a live stream broadcast across the globe through NT Live, and a remounting in New York for 2014 (a complicating fact to which I will return). “The value of monopolistic performance is also contingent on the extent to which it offers spectators an encounter with a place, but one where performance itself is the key

intermediary,” adds McKinnie (28). Nearly all of the audiences experience of St. Peter’s is negotiated through the medium of the performance event. To aid in that mediation, *Macbeth* transformed the church into a controllable theatre space complete with artificial lighting, one that would function as a support structure for the performance occurring onstage. As Cowley notes in his review, the production even chose to create artificial weather within the space to support the story rather than accommodate or utilize the July heat: “During the prolonged opening battle scene, rain pours from above and the mud beneath the soldiers’ feet congeals. It’s a warm evening outside yet inside it’s a Scottish winter.”

Using McKinnie’s framework of monopolistic performance, it becomes clear that *Macbeth* was only interested in the aspects of St. Peter’s that work for the performance. *Macbeth* failed to celebrate or investigate the richness of place in St. Peter’s. “A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth,” Lippard explains, “It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there” (7). By refashioning St. Peter’s into a performance space, *Macbeth* chose to ignore much of this richness and by doing so, narrowed, rather than broadened, the audience’s understanding of the church. Performance may be able to recontextualize space and place, but it can also simply redefine them without acknowledging their existing definitions. By only treating St. Peter’s as a space and symbol, *Macbeth* re-valued the site without acknowledging the value it already had been endowed with over 154 years of use as a church. It also ignores the relationship St. Peter’s has had with the community and city surrounding it, and the history of the site before St. Peter’s was

built. These attributes of place were not useful to the goals of the production, so were ignored.

Macbeth facilitated a particular audience experience of St. Peter's church, one that was largely space-specific and privileged the content of the performance over the site. Despite the limited experience of site provided during the performance event, *Macbeth* still may have transformed transformed St. Peter's into a meaningful place for those who participated in the event. "Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life," writes Lippard; for those who experienced *Macbeth*, a new landmark was etched onto audience members' maps of life and St. Peter's was transformed from an insignificant space into a meaningful place (7). The performance also had the potential to clarify a spectator's geographic map of Manchester, filling in a detail that may have previously been fuzzy or blank, and by doing so, broadening his or her knowledge of the city.

The choice to use St. Peter's was part of a larger festival goal to utilize found spaces throughout the city as performance venues, bringing them back into "circulation" as McKinnie would say. Other spaces included an abandoned railway station, a Wesleyan chapel unused since 1969, and a subterranean warren of tunnels beneath Victoria Station. Alex Poots, MIF13 Artistic Director and CEO, likened use to revival, saying, "It's been a revelation to see crowds in Mayfield Depot and the Albert Hall and a joy to welcome artists...to bring these amazing spaces back to life" (Manchester International Festival). Poots' claim that artists can bring unused urban spaces "back to life" may be true in some cases, but *Macbeth* certainly did not bring St. Peter's back to a life as a consecrated place of worship. Poots claimed that

the festival was able to reveal some of the “hidden places” of Manchester, but I would argue it mostly revealed *space* and not *place*. Transforming St. Peter’s into a performance venue may fill it with life once again, but does it reveal the *place* of the church?

My second case study, *We Players of San Francisco*, expands the audience’s experience of site in their work, but raises similar questions about site-specific practice, particularly regarding the performance of set texts in found spaces and the privileging of performed content over the existing content of the site. Having an understanding of both case studies will be helpful when discussing the potential consequences of their practices on our conceptions, valuations, and uses of place.

CHAPTER III

WE PLAYERS

Founded in 2000 by Ava Roy, We Players practices what they call “site-integrated” theatre. This is their description of their practice:

We Players works with the inherent energies and themes of each performance site. Using the spectacular natural world and architecture of cultural and historical landmarks, we catalyze new ways of seeing and experiencing both theatre and the world. It is part of our mission to stimulate audiences to think about the delicacy and intricacies of their immediate physical environment—our presence in a specific landscape helps raise awareness about the site and the associated environmental, social, and political issues. Using classical texts to discuss current issues in local landscapes, we invite the community to engage fully and awaken to the spectacular world around us. (*We Players*)

There are several claims within this statement that speak to what kind of experiences with place We Players productions facilitate. First, by working with both the space and place of a site—as well as “inherent energies and themes,” more on that later—We Players seeks to change audiences perspectives about the sites they perform in. Second, they seek not only to shift perspectives, but to “raise awareness” about the site’s “environmental, social, and political issues” and discuss “current issues in local landscapes.” Finally, they use their performances to invite the audience to more fully engage with the “spectacular world around us.”

According to We Players, they strive to change audiences’ perspectives, create a dialogue about pertinent issues connected with the site, and provide an opportunity for audience members to engage more fully with the site.

These are terrific goals for a company interested in using performance to investigate and connect audiences with place, but while a statement like this is useful to understand intent, it does not necessarily describe what is occurring

during performance. For the purposes of this case study, the mission statement will be a valuable yardstick against which we can measure the success of their practices. I will be using examples from four of the most recent We Players' productions: *Hamlet* on Alcatraz Island (2010), *The Odyssey* on Angel Island (2011), *Twelfth Night* at Hyde Street Pier (2012), and *Macbeth* at Fort Point (2013). I will also draw heavily on a talk given by Ava Roy, We Players founder and artistic director, at Google headquarters as part of their lecture series. Her presentation provides valuable insights regarding the philosophy and methodology of the company.

Most We Players' productions—and all of my examples—share certain practices or qualities: they use classical texts, primarily Shakespeare; they take place in historic locations, primarily outdoors; they are ambulatory and require the audience to move as well as choose their own vantage point; they embrace an aesthetic of environmental theatre in their staging, blurring distinctions between audience space and performance space; and they partner with other artists and organizations to provide supplemental events in conjunction with the performance such as art exhibits, concerts, and discussions. Like most site-specific performances, each production begins with the selection of the site and the story/text.

We Players has chosen to eschew the term site-specific and have instead chosen to use the descriptor site-integrated for their works. Roy uses this term to differentiate her company's work from the increasingly popularity of the site-specific label. According to Roy, We Players "unique" style of theatre is "embedded in the very particular site," "non-transferrable," and "built into" the environment in

multiple ways (Talks at Google). In many ways, their practice fulfills this description, from Mike Pearson, of how site and performance relate:

Site and performance are caught in an embrace, intimately entangled. Performance draws attention to the details of location, valorizing them, pulling them out of the everyday into relief, acknowledging them, staking claim to them in passing, as places to be, to do, to watch. And the land, in its specificities of slope and texture, occasions certain kinds of physical and emotional engagement and response. (*Site-Specific* 48)

We Players productions allow audiences to engage with the space during the performances, providing opportunity for a reconsideration of the site: what it is, what it can be, what it means. The site also enhances the content of the performance, changing how it is perceived by the audience.

Through their staging, We Players demands that audiences move through the site to follow the action of the play, allowing for a more physical engagement with both the site and the story. For their production of *The Odyssey* on Angel Island, located on the roughly one square mile state park in San Francisco Bay, the action of the play was staged along a trail that followed the perimeter of the island. Over a five hour performance, the audience walked roughly five miles around the island through a variety of landscapes including rocky cliffs and sandy beaches. Rather than be passive spectators seated in fixed seats, the audience became adventurers alongside the characters, able to make their own discoveries about the island along the way (see Figure 1). The performance became an opportunity for audiences to physically explore the various locations around the island and kinesthetically experiences the space. Feeling the sand beneath your feet, smelling the salty air, grabbing ahold of a rock or tree branch to hoist yourself up an incline—these are experiences that are difficult to facilitate if the audience is stationary in a site.



Figure 1. The audience treks across Angel Island with Telemachus (James Udom) in We Players' *The Odyssey* (photo by Mark Kitaoka, courtesy of We Players).

The mobile staging also gave the audience a wide diversity of views, allowing them to see San Francisco Bay and surrounding cities from new perspectives. Roy's goals for her productions include "blowing out the stage space" to create a more "multidimensional experience" of a space (Talks at Google). She describes an example of this from *The Odyssey*, where the audience looks up at a hillside toward the character Telemachus, just in front of them. Behind Telemachus at some distance stands Mentor, and further up atop the hill, Athena looks down upon the action (Talks at Google). This blocking invites the audience to take in a much larger view of the site than if the action was more localized. During another scene with Calypso on the beach, Hermes arrives on the water in a speedboat, primarily behind the audience. Roy repeatedly takes advantage of scale and a 360 degree panorama

in her staging, inviting the audience to enjoy the scenery and vistas provided by the site. This serves to not only to give audiences multiple perspectives of the space, but also locate the site in reference to other Bay Area landmarks (see Figure 2). Unlike St. Peter’s church transformed into a malleable performance space unconnected to the surrounding world, We Players actively facilitates an experience of space that grounds it in the surrounding environment.

It should be noted that increased audience movement throughout a space is not necessarily equivalent to an increased level of audience engagement—either with the space or the content of the performance. Even before the explosion of site-specific performance’s popularity, Michael Kirby noted: “There is a misconception on the part of many critics that environmental theatre is an intrinsically



Figure 2. We Players’ *Hamlet* on Alcatraz with San Francisco in the background. Note the rubble pile on the left which provided the setting for the graveyard scene (photo by Mark Kitaoka, courtesy of We Players).

participatory experience.... Movement of actors and spectators in a space does not necessarily eradicate boundaries or require participation” (92-93). We Players’ staging may not guarantee audiences are more engaged with the space, but it does open up more opportunities to do so over a traditional stationary position. “My hope,” explains Roy, “is that in...participating in the theatrical experience in this way, that we become a little bit more adept at paying attention to what’s happening above us, behind us, below us, and this kind of thing” (Talks at Google). For Roy, the performance is a tool that can broaden an audience’s awareness of the world around them and by doing so, help expand “how we relate to the spaces that we inhabit” (Talks at Google).

We Players also opens up the opportunity for audiences to engage with the site by simply having them walk. Pearson calls walking “a spatial acting out, a kind of narrative, and the paths and places direct the choreography” (95). By requiring the audience to move through the site, We Players is having them author their own narrative of sorts, a narrative of their individual experience in the landscape during the performance event. Pearson notes how “Different paths enact different stories of action for which the landscape acts as a mnemonic” (Pearson 95). As the audience follows a We Players’ performance, perhaps they are also building a personal map of the landscape, a layer of meaning inscribed on the site which can serve as an enduring referent to the ephemeral performance event.

We Players’ productions also give the audience more freedom and agency during the performance event. Again, though it doesn’t ensure an increased level of participation, choices about what to look at, what to pay attention to, and where to

stand in relation to the actors open up more opportunities for the audience to engage with the space, as well as the content of the performance. This agency is risky if the goal is to draw attention to the content of the performance, as it increases the potential focal points for an audience. The multi-focus nature of the performance is amplified by We Players' choice to stage their works in sites that are largely outdoors and public, environments that unlike St. Peter's at Ancoats, are not easily controlled. Utilizing the space to draw attention to the content of the performance becomes more difficult at a site like Angel Island or Alcatraz; distractions abound: the weather, beautiful scenery, passers-by, animals, foghorns, etc.

Rather than be a detriment to performance, Schechner believes a multi-focus environment can create "extreme flexibility yielding harmonious combinations—a kind of intellectual-sensory kaleidoscope" (xxxvii). Roy seems to agree, citing several instances when the uncontrollable particularities of a site enhanced performances, enriching the audience's experience. She describes the "sonic landscape" of Fort Point—the waves crashing against the fortress walls, the rumbling traffic overhead on the Golden Gate Bridge, and on foggy days, the baritone blast of a fog horn—as an asset to their production of *Macbeth* (see Figure 3). The vibrant kaleidoscope of lichens and patinas covering the Fort's brickwork enriched, rather than detracted from, the atmosphere provided by the site (Talks at Google). Roy relishes moments where the sun or wind or crashing waves seem to work along with the content of the performance: "There's a sense of wonder, you know, that I think we're trying to achieve in theatre and when nature can sort of step in and



Figure 3. We Players' *Macbeth* at Fort Point, San Francisco. Note the Golden Gate Bridge above (photo by Mark Kitaoka, courtesy of We Players).

contribute to that, it's pretty remarkable and precious" (Talks at Google). Such ephemeral moments of collaboration between the artist and the site, according to Roy, can "flex" the perceptive faculties of her audiences. Describing a moment when Hamlet was suddenly spotlit by a shaft of sunlight, Roy says, "My hope is that [such a moment] brings us into a greater appreciation that this is a precious unrepeatable moment in time and it will never happen this way, exactly, again. Which if we can practice that in this kind of heightened container of the theatrical experience, we might become a little more facile at appreciating that in our day to day lives" (Talks at Google).

Roy echoes Lippard's belief that "a serial sensitivity to place, are invaluable social and cultural tools, providing much-needed connections to what we call

'nature' and, sometimes, to cultures not our own" (33). Theresa J. May notes that the removal from our everyday lives, a removal that can be provided by theatre, is what makes this sensitivity possible: "Our commercially bombarded lives allow little opportunity to exercise a careful regard for people or place. Theatre has the potential to become a place apart where actors and audience participate in an encounter that gives us pause" (355-356). Site-specific performance, simply by exposing audiences to non-traditional, everyday settings, can challenge us to become more aware of the world around us and by doing so, improve our ability to connect with it.

We Players' performances also invite people to experience sites they may not normally visit. Many audience members, according to Roy, had never visited Hyde Street Pier, let alone knew that it existed (Talks at Google). It suffers from its proximity to the heavily touristed Fisherman's Wharf, an area of the city that many local residents try to avoid. Angel Island requires a ferry ride, a simple barrier that makes it difficult for people to pass by or stumble upon the island; those who want to visit must make an intentional trip. Alcatraz combines both, being both heavily touristed and an island. The simple act of performing familiar stories in these locations created an incentive for area residents (and tourists) to visit these sites. In addition, some productions—such as *Hamlet*—included access to areas normally off-limits to visitors. Participation in the performance event became a gateway for audience members to see and experience sites they might typically miss. This opens up the opportunity for audiences to discover reasons to return to a site and explore further.

We Players method of staging also allows audiences to visually, viscerally, and kinesthetically engage with a site. Through the performance event, audience members are given the opportunity to experience the site's topography and scale, its sights, sounds, smells, and textures, and ephemeral moments created by the many elements at play. This experience includes a mixture of spatial and, for the lack of a better term, *patial* elements including the current living usage of the site. The ways a site is currently being used and defined become apparent to audiences as the performance immerses them in a locale. Hyde Street Pier, Fort Point, and Alcatraz are all units of the National Park Service, a fact made apparent by signage, Park Rangers, and tour groups. Such a designation calls to mind a range of meanings and at least the recognition that a site has history, even if does not reveal the specific history of a site. Crossing paths with fellow hikers on Angel Island can illuminate its role as a recreational park or natural preserve; hearing the nearby foghorns of the Golden Gate at Fort Point can remind audiences of its role as a busy marine traffic route. By not completely containing or subsuming the sites in the theatre event like Ashford & Branagh, We Players allows place to have a stronger voice (or voices) in the event, one less mediated by the performance content.

One element of place that We Players attempts to give voice to is the history of a site. If place can be understood as a stratigraphy of histories and meanings, a more complete experience of place would necessitate excavation of the past, i.e. that which is not on the surface. Roy and the company's literature repeatedly mention the importance of a site's history in their work, though how well they are able to bring history to the surface in performance is open to question. In describing her

process for matching a show with a site, Roy talks about “listening” to the site (Talks at Google). She contends that “stones hold memories,” and, “If we can quiet ourselves enough and slow down enough to tune-in, we might actually hear some of those echoes of the past” (Talks at Google). Even if Roy is able to hear the echoes of the past, her productions do not necessarily amplify them for the audience. In *Hamlet*, the history of Alcatraz as a prison is cited as one reason why it makes an appropriate venue for the play. In his review for *SF Weekly*, Chris Jensen notes, “Hamlet himself says that ‘Denmark’s a prison.’ Why not take the guy at his word and send him to Alcatraz?” Roy takes advantage of that line by placing Hamlet in front of the cell house when delivering that monologue. Jensen lauds Roy’s direction, noting how the history of the place works with the themes of the play: “She makes clever choices for how and where to stage each sequence (a row of jail cells for the play-within-the-play, an abandoned institutional building for Ophelia’s mad scene, the Parade Grounds for the climactic duel).”

Similarly, the history of Angel Island informed Roy’s decision to stage the *Odyssey* there, as she explained to *American Theatre* magazine: “There’s 100 years of military presence on the island, and it’s nicknamed the Ellis Island of the West, so there’s a very strong immigration history.... Those histories connected me to Odysseus, to the theme of going away and having an experience and being transformed” (Tran). The specific history of the island played a part in choosing the *Odyssey* story and also in choosing some locations on the island (using abandoned hospital buildings for the House of the Dead, for example). It is also apparent that the military history of Fort Point and the maritime history of Hyde Street Pier

certainly found resonance in the stories and themes of *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night*, respectively. In all of these productions, Roy selected sites whose history resonated—to some degree, at least—with the themes of the play staged there.

Achieving a basic level of congruence between a place's history and the content of the performance, however, is not necessarily equivalent to illuminating that history. Unlike many of the spatial qualities of a site, history is not easily accessed without mediation of some kind: written texts, photographs, storytelling, film, etc. In an interview with the *New York Times* regarding *Hamlet*, Roy identified performance as potential method of interpretation: "'This is not just a cool place' to stage a play.... 'Theater is a tool for interpretation, to dig in and explore the entrenched themes and issues of the space'" (Stevens). The National Park Service's site-supervisor, Amy Brees, agrees with Roy, stating, "The Park Service is interested in provoking people to think about these places and their meanings. At Alcatraz, those themes are justice, punishment, crime, redemption" (Stevens). *Hamlet* undoubtedly speaks to some of the same themes embedded within the history of Alcatraz, but it is dubious that setting *Hamlet* on Alcatraz can adequately interpret the range of the island's historical "themes and issues." "The history of Alcatraz is surprising to those that only know the Hollywood version," states the National Park Service's website, "Civil War fortress, infamous federal prison, bird sanctuary, first lighthouse on the West Coast, and the birthplace of the American Indian Red Power movement are a few of the stories of the Rock" ("History & Culture—Alcatraz Island"). We Players may be able to echo some of the history of the island with a

show like *Hamlet*, but using a preexisting script leaves them little room to “dig in and explore,” as Roy says, such a complex history.

This raises a question about what, exactly, a performance must “bring to the table” in order to interrogate and recontextualize site. An oft-cited strength of site-specific performance is its ability to change an audience’s perception and understanding of a site. Some, similar to Roy, argue that simply staging a performance within a space will achieve this kind of perceptual shift due to the tension between the fictive reality presented in performance and the physical reality of the site. Susan Haedicke posits:

Here fiction does not work in opposition to reality; rather, the imaginary reinterprets, confuses, subverts, or challenges the real. The onlookers, who see familiar sites through a lens of artistic imagination, experience a re-vision of what seemed established or permanent, and that unexpected shift in the experience of what was, moments before, a familiar world, causes an experiential shock. As boundaries between the fictional and the actual (between art and non-art) become permeable, perhaps indistinguishable, the audience-participants wander in sites with multiple levels of reality. *This blurring of the imaginary and the quotidian has the potential to change how the public sees, understands, and experiences daily life in today’s world.* (103, italics mine)

The capacity described by Haedicke, however, assumes that places which are familiar, and even quotidian, are understood. Tuan notes, “Long residence enables us to know a place intimately, yet its image may lack sharpness unless we can also see it from the outside and reflect upon our experience” (18). Performance may be able to sharpen the image of a place, but it cannot be assumed that the image to be sharpened—that is, the knowledge/experience we may have of a place—is extensive or includes understanding that is beyond our personal experience. If all that is reinterpreted, subverted, or challenged is an individual experience of place, how

much can site-specific theatre do to add to an audience member's understanding of place? Is rearranging and focusing an existing body of personal knowledge all that site-specific theatre should aim for?

Even when a set text like *Hamlet* finds a way to speak to the history and meaning of a place, its capacity for interpretation will remain simplistic at best, limited to an general understanding of place. Shakespeare and Homer did not write about Bay Area locales, so there is only so much about a site that We Players can bring to the attention of its audience through the performance of these texts. Lippard reminds us that "place has width as well as depth" (7); are We Players' productions only facilitating experiences of one of these qualities? If we understand *width* as all that which can be accessed without needing to excavate the layers hidden beneath the surface, I believe it is safe to say that We Players gives audience members the opportunity to connect to the width of a place. Yet the *depth* of a site—the layers of "human histories and memories"—will remain out of reach unless the performance event can bring those to the surface.

Some spectators will have prior knowledge of a place's history, enabling them to draw connections between the performance and the past. Certainly the ability for Jensen to deem Alcatraz a fitting locale for *Hamlet* is due to him already knowing the island's history as a prison. If a spectator was somehow unaware of that history, it would stifle the performance's ability to resonate with the site in that way. For a site like Alcatraz, the extant architecture of Alcatraz may make its history apparent, but not all spaces are so transparent. For *The Odyssey*, Roy chose an old quarry for the setting of Mt. Olympus, a quarry that had supplied stone for San Francisco's financial

district. Overlaying the fictional seat of power on top of the material origins of the region's financial institutions had the potential to recontextualize the audience's perceptions of both the quarry and the financial district, yet it required knowledge of the quarry's past, something not provided by the performance event.

Performance may have the potential for interpretation and exploration of a place's "entrenched themes and issues" as Roy claims, but how well can it fulfill that potential if it is reliant upon the audience's prior knowledge (or experience) of a site to do so? Unless the performance expands the spectator's knowledge of a place, it can only recontextualize or reinterpret what is understood to begin with. If the audience's knowledge of a place is perfunctory, then the potential for a performance to change a perception will be limited.

When site-specific performances fail to broaden their audience's understanding of the multiple meanings given to a place through many years of lived experience, they run the risk of obscuring or even overwriting those layers. Cathy Turner, founder of site-specific company Wrights & Sites, notes, "Each occupation, or traversal, or transgression of space offers a reinterpretation of it, even a rewriting. Thus space is often envisaged as an aggregation of layered writings – a palimpsest" (373). Performances like Ashford and Branagh's *Macbeth* or *We Players'* productions superimpose a new reality atop the palimpsest of their respective sites. However, if the existing layers of the palimpsest are not acknowledged, the productions can become the only layer audiences perceive, replacing a multiplicity of realities with a singular definition of place—that of "performance venue" or "fictional setting." For some *We Players'* audience members, the fictional reality

created by the performance became the only lens through which to see the site. “One of my favorite pieces of feedback from audience members,” says Roy, “is that they say, ‘Alcatraz is now Denmark, forever,’ and ‘Angel Island is now Greece’” (Talks at Google). Has We Players opened up and expanded these audience members’ understanding of Alcatraz and Angel Island or have they blotted out the preexisting richness of place with a performance, essentially re-placing these sites in the minds of the audience? Roy says she hopes performances like *Hamlet* on Alcatraz “leaves residue in the space and mind’s eye of the people who were part of that,” but how can artists ensure that their residue adds to—rather than obscures—the accretion of meaning (qtd. in Stevens)?

The potential for We Players to superimpose meaning upon a site is reinforced by the privileging of performance in the event. Repeatedly, Roy frames her discussion of a site in terms of how it aids the telling of the textual story of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, for example—the primary content being delivered to the audience is the content of the play, not the site. Choices in location and staging are described as being good for the play; rarely does she describe performative choices being used to enhance the audience’s understanding of a place. Ultimately, the performance—and more specifically, the story it is trying to tell—is the goal of the event and what audiences are meant to connect with. Unless a conscious decision is made to make the site the primary subject of the performance, the ability for a company to investigate the environmental, social, and political issues of a place may be compromised.

CHAPTER IV

QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, AND POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES

Ashford and Branagh's *Macbeth* and We Players' work differ in many respects. Regarding the experience of place they facilitate for their audiences, there is a significant difference. *Macbeth* provides a more traditional spatial arrangement like one that might find in a purpose-built theatre space. The event is also structured like a traditional theatre experience with tickets, seats, programs, etc. We Players' productions break that mold, using a wide range of spatial arrangements and requiring audiences to move through the site along with the performers. The production team for *Macbeth* more or less transformed St. Peter's into a controllable theatre space, enabling them to create artificial settings within its walls. We Players, on the other hand, selects sites that are largely public, outdoors, and prone to intrusions by the uncontrollable elements of the space. Each case study holds a variety of opportunities for audiences to engage with space and place, leading to different experiences of site.

Despite the differences between *Macbeth* and We Players, they do have common ground regarding their relationship with space and place. Both use canonical plays/texts unrelated to the sites in which they work (at least not explicitly related). Both privilege the content of the performance over the content of the site: its history, current use, ecology, meaning for various people, etc. Both look to utilize the qualities of the site to enhance the performance, rather than using the performance as a tool to investigate or reveal the layers of place contained within a site. Though there may be instances in both case studies where performance opens

up an audience member's understanding of place, the primary goal of the events is to create a compelling *theatre* experience. Even We Players, who seek to “stimulate audiences to think about the delicacy and intricacies of their immediate physical environment,” ultimately make the performance event about theatre, not about place; the first line of their mission statement is “We Players presents site-integrated performance events that *transform public spaces into realms of participatory theater*” (*We Players*, italics mine).

In privileging the performance over the site, both case studies appropriate space and place for theatrical purposes. Appropriation is a valid approach to site-specific theatre-making, but raises questions about the purpose and implications of site-specific performance. Lyn Gardner, theatre critic for *The Guardian*, lamented the state of site-specific theatre back in 2008:

At best, these productions—regardless of their merits—borrow the atmosphere and aesthetic of their new homes in a relatively superficial and inorganic manner, all take and no give. At worst they provide fodder for those who have suggested that site-specific theatre is merely a gimmicky staging of “real” theatre for the cheap thrill of sensory titillation.... I worry that straight theatre is merely reproducing itself, dressing itself in radical trappings and passing itself off as its other; meanwhile those authentically experimenting with site are left struggling in relative silence.

Gardner worries that site-specific productions whose aim is novelty or “sensory titillation” will overshadow companies doing work in which “layers of the site would be carefully peeled back through a performance that was not an imposition upon the location but sprung forth from it” (Gardner). Her concern may be valid and is worth exploring, but falls short by not also questioning a production's impact on the site itself and our ways of thinking about place.

What happens to our conceptions of place when theatre practitioners appropriate the qualities of a site—its dimensionality, materiality, history, etc.—for theatrical purposes? We Players and the MIF13 *Macbeth* primarily use site like another production element—space and place are akin to the lumber used to build sets or the fabric used to build costumes, treated as a resource to be exploited in ways that will enhance the performance. The choice to restage Ashford and Branagh’s *Macbeth* in New York in 2014—not in a church, but in the drill hall of an repurposed armory— confirms the claim that the production is ultimately interested in place as a resource: as long as it will serve the performance, it is an appropriate site. St. Peter’s, Alcatraz, Fort Point, Hyde Street Pier, and Angel Island were ultimately determined to be fitting sites for the production of theatre because they contained qualities that could be exploited profitably, in the full sense of the word. It could be argued, from a performance-centric perspective, that the use of site as a resource is an excellent choice. However, from a vantage point concerned about how we think about and use place, it raises questions. Isn’t place more than a material resource ready to be exploited for artistic benefit? What responsibility do artists have to treat the sites in which they work as more than raw material?

When an artist uses site like just another tool of the trade, ready to be repurposed as art, they risk ignoring the *place* of a site, one rich with lived experience and meaning—past, present, and future. By claiming a place for performance without regard to its existing width and depth, artists can unintentionally reinforce a belief that place is valuable insofar as it is exploitable for human consumption or use. Humanity cannot avoid using space and place for our

benefit, nor should we, but place is more than a commodity. Our choices about *how* to use a site and *for what* matter; they can have significant influence over our neighborhoods, cities, countrysides, and wild lands. The consequences of claiming land without regard for *place* are not hard to find, one only has to look to Crimea, Israel and Palestine, Northern Ireland, or the US-Dakota wars for extreme examples. Yet similar consequences, albeit smaller and less violent, play out everyday in our communities. A choice to allow the development of suburban big box stores through rezoning can ripple throughout a community, impacting downtown storefronts, transportation infrastructure, storm water runoff, and more. The choice to not use a site can also have impacts. The creation of a protected marine sanctuary can impact shipping channels, local fishing economies, and the families and communities who depend on them.

On a theoretical level, space can be conceived of as neutral, but in actuality, space is intricately bound with place—and place is never neutral, nor is it isolated. Each place is a nexus along an interconnected and multi-temporal network of people, places, non-human life, material, and events. When place is claimed for a singular purpose, that claim muffles or interrupts an existing polyphony of voices. On one level, to claim land as a performance venue runs the risk of ignoring those stakeholders, human or otherwise, whose interests do not align with the artist's vision. This is a potential consequence that all artists should take into consideration and must be considered case by case. On a more general level, imposing a performance upon a site can reinforce an existing social narrative of individual ownership, like McKinnie notes about monopolistic performance: “[It] trades on the

privileging of private property ownership as the ideal economic relation between social subject and space under modern capitalism” (29). Though private ownership has many merits, McKinnie points out that it “elevates an owner’s claim to a particular parcel of space over competing claims” (29). A choice to transform a place into the realm of theatre, even temporarily, is a choice to elevate the artist’s claim to the land over others.

I am not advocating for the abandonment of site-specific theatre, nor do I believe its practice needs to be sharply curtailed. I believe what is necessary is a more conscientious approach to the use of place. Artists who are only interested in how place can benefit their work without considering the ramifications of their decisions perpetuate a dangerous mindset, one based on a notion that humanity can be separate from the places we inhabit. As Lippard notes, such a separation is myth: “Each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really what all ‘local places’ consist of. By entering that hybrid, we change it...” (6). A mentality that ignores our dependency on the places that sustain us, elevates individual desire over communal interest, and in-the-moment thinking over long-term consideration is already prevalent in our world and has proven to be detrimental. When artists engage with those places in our communities that connect with many stakeholders, a more sensitive and comprehensive approach to place is warranted. This awareness must also be demonstrated in artistic practice and not merely iterated in an artist’s intentions. The *desire* for an integration with place is not equivalent to an acknowledgement that one *is already* integrated with the land, as Lippard points out: “It is one thing to

enjoy the idea of interconnectedness and another to understand what it means in contemporary American society and daily life. Many adherents are more anxious to connect with land...than to forge a collective human connection and take responsibility for the ways their own lifestyles affect entire ecosystems” (16).

Site-specific performance is uniquely positioned to advocate for a more conscientious use of place. By facilitating an enlightening experience of place, it can help rewrite the cultural narratives that have led to the unilateral exploitation of place and lead to more responsible stewardship, as landscape architect Ronald Lee Fleming notes in his book, *The Art of Placemaking*:

The positive force of making those meanings in the environment more accessible should restore a vision of place as a declaration of public value. It is this mental linkage to a sense of value, to a connection with community, that becomes the foundation for an ethic of care. This should be the unifying reason for treating the environment with a greater sense of responsibility. (28)

My third case study, PlaceBase Productions of Minneapolis, Minnesota, offers a different approach to site-specific performance that I believe begins to address these concerns and fulfill Lippard and Fleming’s visions. Their work differs from the MIF13 *Macbeth* and *We Players* in several ways. Instead of imposing a predetermined artistic vision onto a place, PlaceBase allows the voice of their locations to determine the show. Instead of using plays that have no explicit connection to the places where they perform, PlaceBase makes the content of place—its history, memories, and meanings—the content of their performances. This ensures that the performance adds to the existing multiplicity of site rather than overwrites it. Instead of prioritizing the vision of the artist (be it director or playwright), PlaceBase prioritizes the voices of the people who have a stake in each

performance site. Their productions seek to reinvigorate the communities in which they work, illuminating not only the history of a place, but the present-day community who inhabits it. Instead of the performance being the culmination of their work, PlaceBase uses the performance event to begin a conversation in the community about the value and use of a particular place.

CHAPTER V

PLACEBASE PRODUCTIONS

PlaceBase Productions is a very young company, having put on their first production in October 2012. To date, they have completed three projects in the town of Granite Falls, MN—*A Meandering River Walk*, *With the Future on the Line: Paddling Theatre From Granite Falls to Yellow Medicine*, and *Granite Falls: Saturday Nights!*—and are currently developing projects in collaboration with the towns of Fergus Falls, MN and New Ulm, MN. The company is also very small, comprised of only two people: Ashley Hanson and Andrew Gaylord. Hanson and Gaylord partner with communities to create their productions, relying on community members to help create and perform each show. The final products always strive to be mobile, site-specific, interactive, educational, and entertaining. Since the community is involved in both the creation and the performance of each production, PlaceBase creates multiple opportunities for the community to experience a site from the very beginning of the process. Given the aim of my project, however, I will primarily focus on how PlaceBase facilitates an experience of site through their performance events. That being said, it can be difficult to clearly separate the process from the performance itself, so there will inevitably be some overlap of the two in my analysis.

PlaceBase, first and foremost, seeks to tell the story of the places in which they work. Their mission statement states, “Our work begins with the history and stories of a significant place” (*PlaceBase Productions*). Unlike *Macbeth* or *We Players*, who have used established plays which precede the work, PlaceBase’s

performances originate in a place: its embedded layers of history and meaning are the genesis of the performance. Each project begins with a phase of research to unearth the stories, histories, and memories associated with their site. Hanson and Gaylord typically start doing their own independent research on the community and its history. Using books, museums, newspaper archives, etc., they establish a good understanding of the history right from the start. This groundwork prepares them to talk with community members directly, allowing them to unearth more content for the performances. According to PlaceBase:

Having this basis of understanding of where the community has been will help you to formulate deep and meaningful questions that go below the surface of historical facts. By having an understanding of the history of the community, you show those you meet that you have already invested the time and energy to begin to get to know the place/subject. You are able to have conversations about the content, rather than just asking questions. (*Granite Falls 7*)

The next stage of the research phase is to interview community members in a variety of settings.

PlaceBase primarily conducts interviews in one of three ways: individual interviews, group interviews, and community “Story Swap Workshops.” To find the best individuals to interview one-on-one, Hanson and Gaylord look for people they call “connectors;” PlaceBase calls finding the connectors the “most important part of the process” (*Granite Falls 8*). Connectors are trusted community members who are involved in civic life, know many people, and can advocate on behalf of PlaceBase, connecting them with the right people and resources. For their work in Granite Falls, speaking with the connectors provided PlaceBase with “a wealth of information, including additional individuals and groups to meet with;” following

their suggestions led Hanson and Gaylord on “an incredible journey through lives and stories” (*Granite Falls* 9). PlaceBase also conducts informal interviews of groups in locations where they already gather: coffee shops, salons, retirement centers, etc. These allow for Hanson and Gaylord to cast a broader net than individual interviews and in Granite Falls, usually resulted in lively back-and-forth reminiscing among residents (*Granite Falls* 9).

The material gathered through research and interviews provides PlaceBase with a foundation for their Story Swap Workshops. These are informal, but structured, community gatherings that give community members the opportunity to tell their own stories about the subject at hand, i.e. the Minnesota River for both the *Meandering River Walk* and *Paddling Theatre*. The workshops allow PlaceBase to gather more content about their subject/place, but they also provide a catalyst for community participation. For the *Paddling Theatre* project, publicity about the workshops targeted community members who already proclaimed strong connections to the river—“River Enthusiasts, River History Buffs, Naturalists, Paddlers and Self-Proclaimed ‘River Rats’”—in order to build on existing networks within the area (*With the Future* 6). In each Granite Falls production, PlaceBase chose to host their workshops and various other events at the K.K. Berge Building, a well-known, centrally-located building that placed the action of the production process in the midst of the community and made it very accessible to the residents. Even the offer of free food provided an incentive to show up and get involved. Unlike individual interviews or visits with existing social groups within the community, the Story Swap Workshops were open to anyone and “fostered relationships between all

ages and backgrounds” (*Granite Falls* 11). The workshops began to form a new social network within Granite Falls that cut across various divisions within the community; a new community wherein “What holds it together is the constant reference back to place and our mutual acquaintance with it, with where we are now, or once were” (Pearson 55). The workshops also helped to form the core company for each project: PlaceBase found that “most of the participants in the Story Swap Workshops ended up being involved in the production in some way” (*Granite Falls* 10).

All of Hanson and Gaylord’s research is centered around a place and its connection to the community around it. The collected histories, memories, and meanings are then compiled into a narrative fashioned by Hanson and Gaylord. The scripts are not pre-determined, nor are they only connected to the site in a broadly thematic way; instead, they are akin to the voice of the place, as filtered by the mouthpiece of the community who inhabits it. Regarding *Meandering River Walk*, PlaceBase writes, “The script incorporated as many of the stories and characters of the area that could fit, keeping the community’s voice at the core, while staying within the parameters of the defined community and theme” (*Granite Falls* 11). During the writing process, Hanson and Gaylord seek guidance from various community partners “to ensure that the community and history is accurately represented” (*With the Future* 7).

For both *Meandering River Walk* and the *Paddling Theatre*, the voice of place manifested in the script is strongly, though not exclusively, historical. Unlike *We Players*, which may nod to a site’s history while telling the stories of Shakespeare or

Homer, PlaceBase believes a place itself is a story, filled with a plethora of narratives worth exploring and sharing. Their performances do not have additional textual intermediaries standing between the audience and the place; rather, the script itself is used to draw the audience's attention to the place. Describing the value of performances to accomplish such a goal, PlaceBase writes, "These experiences place value on the location, reminding the community that this is their shared home, strengthening their communal 'sense of place' and the connecting trust in each other to make decisions based on the benefit of the community rather than the individual" (*Granite Falls 4*).

This was PlaceBase's explicit goal for their first project, *Meandering River Walk*. PlaceBase partnered with Clean Up the River Environment (CURE) on the project:

With support from the Bush Foundation's InCommons Program, CURE began connecting with artists from the Twin Cities area to explore art and community development in Western Minnesota. In early 2012, CURE met with Twin Cities based artist and theatre practitioner, Ashley Hanson of PlaceBase Productions, who had an idea to explore and address the past and current changes of the river valley through an interactive community-based performance.... (*Granite Falls 3*)

By working with CURE, a locally-based organization whose mission is to "focus public awareness on the Minnesota River Watershed and to take action to restore and protect its water quality, biological integrity, and natural beauty for all generations," PlaceBase made it clear that their interest was in the river and its role in the region (*Granite Falls 3*).

Meandering River Walk was created and performed during what Hanson called "an anxious time" for the town (Queenan). In addition to challenges of an

aging and declining population, business closures, and vacant storefronts downtown, Granite Falls was in the midst of a dam removal project on the river while *Meandering* was being developed. Hanson describes the town having a “protective element” to their relationship with the river, one that is, in part, characterized by people “not wanting it to change and most definitely not wanting it to go away, and that fear of it just not being there anymore” (Queenan). In the face of uncertainty about how the removal would change the river, the project became a vehicle for the community to celebrate the river and address their concerns about its future. The location of the performance, on the riverfront plaza behind the K.K. Berge Building, added an additional layer to the context of the performance. Several years before, the town was required to alter their riverfront to meet new flood mitigation standards. An entire row of buildings was slated for demolition, but the town rallied to save one: the K.K. Berge Building. After an extensive remodel spearheaded by CURE, which necessitated raising the first floor twenty inches, the building became the local headquarters for CURE and today serves as an arts and events center. As the audience took in *Meandering River Walk*, the K.K. Berge Building was their constant companion; the performance was embedded in a place newly restored—and redefined—through community cooperation and resilience. It was a fitting setting for a show about the value of place to a community.

As *Meandering River Walk* began, the performance turned the audience’s focus to the river right away. When Carl, the narrator for the performance, welcomed the audience to the riverbank he told them: “On this brief river walk we want to share with you some of the stories of the people and the land right here in

Granite Falls on the Minnesota River. We have the privilege of retelling many of these stories on the spot where the original events occurred” (*Granite Falls* 46-47). Carl makes it clear that the performance is not the primary goal of the event, but a tool used to give voice to the people and the land surrounding the audience. With a lamp in one hand, he continued to lay out for the audience a framework for understanding the relevance of the performance content:

These stories connect us to the past, but they also remind us that the past is gone, and we will never see it again as it was. The past does, however, continue to live inside each of us in everything that we do. The past is like a lamp that we reach for in the hope that it will illuminate our future. (*Granite Falls* 47)

Carl notes the historical bent of the performance, but emphasizes that it is also about how today’s community can let the past inform their *future* relationship with the river.

Carl ended his introduction with a symbolic gesture to the riverbank’s drinking fountain, using it as a metaphorical—but physically tangible—segue into the distant past of the last ice age. “This water,” he proclaimed, “has given life to many people. Before it could sustain human life, the water was multiplied in volume by a million times, and took the form of a great sheet of ice that covered this whole area for hundreds of miles around” (*Granite Falls* 47). As Carl drew a connection for the audience between the contemporary water fountain and the millennia old glaciers that shaped the landscape surrounding them, a group of performers brought the glaciers to life with strips of white fabric. “When the glaciers receded,” explained Carl, “they carved the shape of these hills and valleys like an artist in stone carves away many layers to reveal the shape underneath” (*Granite Falls* 47). As Carl

described the artistry of the ice, the fabric pulled away to reveal an actor playing “The River,” carving away at blocks of granite. Carl continued, “This river is our inheritance from the glacier. Life grew along the river’s banks, and everything that grew up here owes its life to the river. For ten thousand years there was no filtration system for the water. In every home and family, until 1917, everyone drank the water sent straight from the river” (*Granite Falls* 47). As he narrated, the personified River drank from the fountain (see Figure 4).

This embodied, multi-temporal, and site-specific depiction of the area’s early history effectively compressed time. The chronological distance between the people of Granite Falls and the prehistoric ice was equated to a spatial distance, reducing the gap between them; what had once been distant, abstract, and unfathomable



Figure 4. The River (Joe Whitehawk Jr.) leads the audience along the banks of the Minnesota River (photo by Robert Gaylord, courtesy of PlaceBase Productions).

became present, tangible, and accessible by all of the audience. In *Theatre/Archaeology*, archaeologist Michael Shanks notes, “Something once inconsequential may turn out to be heavily charged with cultural significance for later people.... The past does not hold comfortably [at] some point in a linear flow of time from past through to the present.... Instead the past bubbles around us” (Pearson and Shanks xvii). Through a performative conjuring, the glaciers of long ago bubbled up among the audience in the guise of fabric and a drinking fountain, giving new meaning to the glaciers—as active creators of the landscape—and the site—as the legacy of the glaciers’ artistry.

After establishing the geologic history of the area, the play introduced the human stories of the land with a comic exchange between a Dakota man and a French fur trader. Generous creative liberties were taken to make a long and difficult history of settlement an easily digestible and entertaining interaction between characters, and criticism of PlaceBase’s light touch as well as a strong Euro-American perspective is warranted. Considering the use of humor, PlaceBase believes in “using humor and a sense of play to ensure [the] audience leaves feeling positive about their experience; [and has] the space to laugh, enjoy, and connect with their community” (*With the Future* 7). The use of humor may serve the company’s overall goals to inspire connection with and care of the local community and environment, but it runs the risk of downplaying important histories and perspectives. In an attempt to counter the humor of the opening exchange between the French and Dakota, Hanson and Gaylord included a section acknowledging the tragic cost of Euro-American settlement. It featured an actress playing Ella Deloria,

a former Granite Falls resident who was the granddaughter of a French trapper and a Yanktonais Dakota medicine man—she was an embodiment of the confluence of cultures. In performance, Ella told the audience, “Tension between these worlds would build, leading to the tragic events of 150 years ago—the US-Dakota War,” reminding spectators how “the river bore witness to these tragic events” (*Granite Falls* 49). As the audience observed a moment of silence, a young child stood on a footbridge over the river and cast leaves into the water in memory of all those who died during the conflict. Not only did the episode highlight an oft-overlooked story of the area, but also towards the present day river flowing before them, reminding the audience of the tragedies written upon its waters. This inclusion of this scene acknowledges the violent side of Euro-American expansionism, but does it adequately represent the voice of the indigenous people who called the Minnesota River home prior to settlement?

The Euro-American emphasis of *Meandering River Walk*'s narrative reveals a fault in PlaceBase's creative process. Since the script was based on historical research and community interviews, it was a product of what Hanson and Gaylord unearthed through these channels. If who they heard from in the community were of European ancestry, that narrative would naturally dominate. Similarly, if the history books, historical society museums, or archives of a community omit certain stories and perspectives, willfully or not, those narratives are not likely to make it into the script. In order for PlaceBase's community-based methodology to produce a performance that includes a diversity of perspectives, a more diverse population

must be included in the creative process. In their post-production evaluation of *Meandering River Walk*, PlaceBase recognized this deficiency, writing:

A major challenge was the involvement of the Dakota Community in the project. Despite multiple attempts, we were unable to reach or meaningfully impact this particular demographic. It takes a lot of time and trust to reach this community and our project timeline did not provide the time needed to meaningfully build the trust needed. We also did not reach the Hispanic population or the teenage/young adult population. In future projects, we will make addressing this challenge a key part of our project goals to ensure that all community demographics are represented. (*Granite Falls* 17)

This note was repeated in PlaceBase's evaluation of *Paddling Theatre*, their second production in Granite Falls. It raises an important question about which narratives these performances reinforce and whether the history of the river being illustrated is an inclusive history.

Though limited by participation and source material, Hanson and Gaylord were still able to illuminate some of the river's multiplicity. In the two opening episodes of *Meandering River Walk*, the river was defined as the product of geological forces over time, a drinking water source, and a witness to the tragedies of the US-Dakota War. Throughout the performance, the river was repeatedly recast in a new light. It has been or remains: a power source for town founder Henry Hill's grist mill, a generator of electricity for the town, a resource for past resident Norman Nelson's ice business, a parade route for the Water Carnival, a threat to the town during flood years, and, according to the Dakota, a sacred place where the cottonwoods "take the life of the river into the sky" (*Granite Falls* 61). The performance did not settle on a singular definition for the river, but made it clear that the river has been many things to many people over the years.

It also does not settle on a strictly historical understanding of the river, either. During a section called the “I Remember Montage,” the personal memories of present-day residents collected during workshops and interviews were recited by performers along the riverbank. This montage further contributed to the river’s heterogeneous definition, but it also served as a connection point for past and present generations, as Gaylord notes: “A lot of these memories came from older people in the town and the younger kids in the cast said ‘Well, I remember that too.’ These very specific memories follow from generation to generation” (Queenan). Memory as an integral part of landscape is noted by Simon Schama in his book *Landscape and Memory*. Schama describes landscape as a “work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (6). Through performance, the memories of the Minnesota River and Granite Falls were teased out of the land and used to connect the audience to place, and the audience to one another. *Meandering River Walk* revealed the Minnesota River as a “repository of cultural memory,” to borrow Marvin Carlson’s phrase, one that weaves a web of connections between people and places throughout the community (141).

Though history and memory are prominent elements of *Meandering River Walk*, the performance was not limited to reenactment or nostalgia. Moments throughout realigned the narrative with Carl the Narrator’s introductory call to use the past as illumination for the future. In effect, these moments used history to remind the contemporary audience of the continued value and relevance of the river to community life and identity. Two brief episodes about building the future provide good examples. In the first, town founder Henry Hill proclaimed, “Anyone who

wants to use their heads and get their hands dirty oughta plan on sticking around. We're building the future fellas!" (*Granite Falls* 49). As he spoke, he stood at the edge of the audience like an commander leading his army into battle, aligning himself with the crowd as together they faced the falls—the same falls which brought Hill to the site in 1871. No longer was Hill separated from the audience by time and irrelevance; instead, he was a fellow citizen leading the charge into the future (see Figure 5).

The Henry Hill episode also called for the audience to reconsider the centrality of the river in the community. In the duet which closes the episode, Hill sings:

Where the river runs so pure and clear
And the earth is dark and rich,
What better place to make a home
And show 'em all just what I'm worth.



Figure 5. Henry Hill (Samuel Hathaway, center on platform) addresses the audience in *Meandering River Walk* (still from video by Anne Queenan).

When the children learn to swim right here
And grow up strong and tall,
Then we'll have a good life here in my town,
Granite Falls. (*Granite Falls* 50)

There is a question in these lines, one that asks the audience whether or not Granite Falls is a good place to make a home, whether it is a good place to prove one's worth. It also asks what role the river has to play in creating a "good life" in Granite Falls. For the audience listening to Hill and watching the falls cascade behind him, there is an opportunity to reconsider the value of this place in light of its significance to prior generations.

In the second, a vignette about the 1952 flood, the theme of (re)building a future are revisited:

(Two people pass each other slowly in boats, moving continuously. Somber.)

Town 1: Can you believe this? 5th avenue in a boat?

Town 2: Yeah, my store is completely under water.

Town 1: The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.

Town 2: That's what we all have to keep in mind. We'll get 'er built back up again. We've done it before.

Town 1: We've done it before. Give it a few weeks, and then we'll get at cleaning up this place. (*Granite Falls* 59)

As the exchange between flood victims took place, the K.K. Berge Building stood in plain view of the audience, its presence a testimony to both the threat of flooding and the success of community collaboration. On the other side ran the Minnesota River and among the audience were memories of recent floods in 1997 and 2001. By telling the stories endemic to the site instead of overlaying a set text, the site in performance became a "potent mnemonic trigger, helping to evoke specific past

times related to the place and time of performance and facilitating a negotiation between the meanings of those times” (Harvie, quoted in Pearson 9). The recollection of these historical events in the very places where they occurred allowed the audience to draw multi-temporal connections between themselves, their predecessors, the community, and the river. *Meandering River Walk* asked for more than an individual reconsideration of place—“What does this river mean to you?”; it asked for a reconsideration the river’s centrality to community life, livelihood, and identity—“What does this river mean to us?”

The emphasis on the centrality of place in community is enhanced by PlaceBase’s community-based praxis. In their Granite Falls work, the characters who brought history to life onstage were not impersonal, unknown performers, but fellow community members. The distinction between the audience/“us” and the performers/“them” was blurred, moving towards a single designation of “us.” This was a community performing itself. for itself. Messages about building and rebuilding the town spoken to onstage characters became exhortations for the current residents of Granite Falls, spoken from the mouths of their friends, neighbors, and community leaders.

The line between past and present was blurred in a couple of casting choices that drew direct lines between the past and present. James Putnam, the founder of the Granite Falls Tribune, was portrayed by Scott Tedrick, the current news editor for the Tribune. The present-day mayor, Dave Smiglewski, played Andrew Volstead, who served as mayor before he went on to a career in Congress. Volstead is regarded as one of the “Big Four” in Granite Falls, four men who significantly shaped

the town's infrastructure in the early twentieth century. In *Meandering*, these four characters sing:

There was a town on the Western Frontier.
We passed through once, and I said, "Hey, listen dear!
The people are good, and the water is clear.
Let's build our little house right here."
We settled in, and I met my friends right nearby.
That's how we became The Four.

We made a deal that we'd all stay nearby.
Me and Olaus built a dam, and Andrew was the Mayor.
McLarty ran his bank with a keen and steely eye.
We all got together at Tillie's for coffee and pie.
The town began to grow. You can thank us guys.
They began to call us The Big Four.

Electricity and water intact,
We made 'em all municipal, and honey that's a fact!
So that when the hard times came we could stay in black,
Breathing a little easier with the city at our back.
Even in 2012 it's hard to argue with that.

The song salutes the past, but valorizes community, friendship, municipal ownership, and public service, identifying them as values embedded in Granite Falls' very foundations. The use of anachronism—self-reflexive references to 2012 and Tillie's, a contemporary restaurant—and the casting of mayor Smiglewski as Volstead, serve to reinforce the relevance of these values, and the place in which they reside, for the present-day audience.

Meandering River Walk concluded with a reiteration of the themes of multiplicity, community, and the future. The conclusion first reminded the audience that the river has been defined in many ways over the years and that multiplicity is a strength, not a deficiency: "People do not always agree about the right path for the future, but this diversity of opinion has kept the spirit of Granite Falls alive" (*Granite*

Falls 62). The performance captured this sentiment in its attempts to both reveal different facets of the river and reinforce unity by continually centering the narrative around the river. The final words of the performance reinforced the river's centrality to the community and conversely, the community's centrality in the stewardship of the river:

The Minnesota River connects our past and future. Our past is covered up by its currents, and our future is exposed on its shores: where today artists and workers of all stripes gather to make plans, where our children play games without limits to their imagination, and where we all hope, one day, to rest in our old age. The river has given us an abundance of life, and the river has, at times, taken back what belongs to it. This is the land of the river even more than it is our land. We are called to care for the river as it has cared for us. The river is our strength and our home here in Granite Falls. (*Granite Falls 62*)

These concluding remarks make it clear that the performance was intended as more than entertainment, it was designed as a call for audiences to renew their commitment to the river and the community upon its shores.

As a reiteration of community history and values, *Meandering River Walk* warrants scrutiny regarding which histories and values it chose to reinforce. As noted before, its version of history is predominately a Euro-American one. Like any narrative, *Meandering River Walk* reflected the implicit biases of those who shaped it—in this case, Hanson, Gaylord, and the people of Granite Falls who chose to participate. Left unacknowledged or unchecked, these biases can have implications for the community and its understanding of place. For example, when Henry Hill sings about Granite Falls being a good place to build a home, he does not acknowledge those who may have already called it home, such as the Dakota. Could there be an alternate perspective about the founding of Granite Falls, one that

defines the settlement of the area as theft, genocide, or colonialism? The performance also unquestioningly celebrates capitalism and economic development. For instance, the industry and power made possible through the damming of the Minnesota River is celebrated, but how did it affect the ecology of the river? If *Meandering River Walk* claims to tell the story of Granite Falls and the Minnesota River, but excludes certain voices or perspectives, what message might it communicate to those who disagree with the historical narrative being performed? Do they not belong in the community? Do they not have claim to these places?

These are difficult questions and it is unlikely that 45-minute community performance like *Meandering River Walk* would be able to address them adequately. Nor can it be expected for a performance like this to include every possible story or perspective. Yet there is room for PlaceBase and companies like it to consider how they tell the story of place and to question the dominant narratives that are uncovered in their research. Granite Falls, and the places it holds dear, are not the result of an inevitable chain of events, as Fleming reminds us:

The simple fact that every building, standing or fallen, represents a choice made in the public sphere means that historical change is intimately linked with the world we see around us. To raise awareness of this timeline of choice puts the contemporary viewer in a key position to sort out the meaning of both past and present impacts. We are the heirs to a resonant story that we can continue to evaluate.... [Public] consciousness can be activated with sensitive and effective interpretation that reveals both choices and motivations. (211)

There is a potential for site-specific performance to invite audiences to consider the choices that have shaped the places they inhabit. However, if artists simply reinforce a belief that the choices made in the past were the *only* choices or the *best* choices, how effective can they be at broadening the perspectives of their audience?

Returning to the primary question of this project, what kind of experience of site did *Meandering River Walk* facilitate for the audience? Like *We Players*, the ambulatory style allowed for audience members to self-select their perspective, choose what to focus on, and mingle and converse with fellow spectators during scene transitions. As they moved through the space during the performance, the audience members were exposed to the sights and sounds of the riverbank—the cool breeze, the roar of the falls, the sweet smell of the cottonwoods—and were able to have a visceral and sensorial experience of the site. By making place the primary subject for the performance event, however, *Meandering River Walk* differed significantly from *We Players*' productions and the MIF13 *Macbeth*. In their overview of the project, PlaceBase explained their vision of the production:

The shared experience is a starting point for deeper discussion—creating the impetus for action based on this commonly understood language. These experiences place value on the location, reminding the community that this is their shared home, strengthening their communal 'sense of place' and the connecting trust in each other to make decisions based on the benefit of the community rather than the individual. (*Granite Falls 4*)

The primary reason for the event was to draw attention to the river and the town's connection with it, so if an audience member turned their focus to the river behind the performers, it works with—not against—the narrative being told. If the audience for *Macbeth* turned too much attention to St. Peter's church, they would have missed out on the primary reason for the event: the story being performed. On the other hand, an inattentive spectator at *Meandering River Walk*, even one who missed most of the narrative, could have still fulfilled part of PlaceBase's mission. Additionally, for those audience members that were attentive to the performance, *Meandering River Walk* revealed the many layers that make up the places of Granite

Falls and the Minnesota River. More than *We Players* and the MIF13 *Macbeth*, *Meandering* was used to unpack the richness of place surrounding the audience.

Due to the community-based process used by PlaceBase, there was a varied level of community participation in the production. Some contributed to story-swap workshops, some performed in the play, some came to watch, and some participated in a combination of these. According to the feedback gathered in surveys of the workshop participants, cast, and audience, the success of *Meandering River Walk* as an experience of place was not universal. Of course, no artist can control or determine audience response; or, in the words of Peter Schumann, “You say what you want to say and hope you’re understood. The consequences of your activities are pretty much out of your control” (qtd. in Bell 279). The value of place certainly came into sharper focus for several workshop participants and cast members:

After being involved in this production, I do feel a connection to this town that I didn’t have before.

I feel that I am more connected to this community and have a better sense of something bigger than myself.

Seeing a play like this gives you a new appreciation for your own history. You realize how colorful and interesting it was...and then suddenly you start looking at things differently, because suddenly it’s personal because in some way you have seen these historical figures in the flesh—so it becomes personal to you.

I learned so much about Granite Falls history and what or how other people grew up and their experiences. (*Granite Falls* 16)

Audience members also commented on the significance of place brought to light in performance:

(*From an out-of-towner*) This community is so beautiful and full of life as the river that runs across it.

We will once again have water when this dam thing is done.

Clean, clear water again! (*Granite Falls* 19)

Overall, though, PlaceBase's surveys revealed a shortcoming of the performance:

Although the river was central in our research, script and performance, it seems that the message was not completely clear that this production was a call to action to care for the river. There were more comments about personal connections to the community and the history of the community than strengthening the connection to the river. In future projects, we will be sure to highlight the call to action to care for the river as one of the main project goals. (*Granite Falls* 17)

For their second project in Granite Falls, PlaceBase found a format to better address the shortfalls of *Meandering River Walk*.

In *With the Future on the Line: Paddling Theatre from Granite Falls to Yellow Medicine*, PlaceBase gave the river an even more central role than their first production. In *Paddling Theatre*, performed in May of 2013, the company put the audience in canoes and made 8 miles of riverbank their stage, immersing the spectators in the river environment. The production was put on in conjunction with CURE, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and adventure outfitter Wilderness Inquiry as part of the 50th Anniversary Celebration of Minnesota Water Trails, the state's system of recreational waterways. The central fixture of this performance was once again the river, but the narrative was about how Granite Falls became the county seat of Yellow Medicine County. Granite Falls earned that status thanks to concerned residents who stole documents from neighboring Yellow Medicine City in order to sway the pivotal election in their favor. Using the format of a "live action radio drama," *Paddling Theatre* followed the exploits of Dallas and TP Hill as they make their way from Granite Falls to Yellow Medicine City (the present day Upper Sioux Agency State Park) to fix the elections.

Similar to *Meandering River Walk*, *Paddling Theatre* was filled with episodes that illuminated the history of the river. These included: the arrival of the railroad, the history of the Dakota, the use of the river by French Voyageurs, the passage of steamships that once plowed the river, and of course, the climax of Dallas and TP stealing the documents from Yellow Medicine City. Like their first project, each episode revealed another layer in the complex history of the region. One notable episode addressed the current ecology of the river, specifically freshwater mussels. It featured a mussel collector and a naturalist discussing the many native species of freshwater mussel found in Minnesota (see Figure 6). The scene culminates in a showstopper of a tune naming each endemic species of mussel:

There's the Pondmussel, Pocketbook, Pistolgrip, and Pimpleback,
Wartyback, Washboard, am I clear? Listen here,
Snuffbox, Salamander, Sheepnose, Spectaclecase,
Deertoe, Elktoe, Fawnsfoot, and Monkey face.
Heelsplitter, Giant floater, Strange floater, Butterfly
Mapleleaf, Three Ridge, Lilliput, and Higgins eye.
Pondshell, Papershell, Sandshell, Fatmucket,
Ebonyshell, Fluted Shell, Hickory Nut, ohhhhhhh...
There's a few mussel names that I shouldn't mutter here,
Plus the Spike, and the Bleufer and the Elephant Ear.

I never met a mussel got me down.
They always make me smile when I'm feeling like a frown.
They wear their shells from ear to ear like a river bottom clown.
I never met a mussel got me down. (*With the Future* 52-53)

Apart from the entertainment provided by "The Mussel Song," it gave the audience a hint of the biodiversity of the river, even when limited to one category like freshwater mussels. It also highlighted how the river has value to other species, not only humans. When the collector tells the naturalist that he sells off his mussels to be made into buttons, the naturalist replies, "Buttons, ingenious...and horrifying



Figure 6. The audience watches a scene about mussels from their canoes in PlaceBase’s *Paddling Theatre* (photo by Sarina Otaibi, courtesy of CURE).

somehow” (*With the Future* 51). It is a short line, but calls into question the human use of the river’s resources and asks the audience to consider their relationship to other species which call the Minnesota River home.

Beyond the content of the performance, *Paddling Theatre* required a much higher level of physical engagement with the river during the performance. The only way to see the play was to be on the river in a canoe or kayak. Spectators could either reserve a spot in a boat helmed by guides from Wilderness Inquiry or supply their own watercraft. Each episode of the performance was staged at a different location along the riverbank or in separate canoes that audiences would come across along the route. Positioning the audience in the water rather than on the riverbank deepened their experience of place in a few ways. First, it transformed the river from an object to look *at* to an environment to be *in*. The riverfront where

Meandering River Walk was performed may have functioned as an environmental space according to Schechner's use of the term—"Spaces which contain, or envelop, or relate, or touch all the areas where the audiences is and/or the performers perform"—but the river itself primarily functioned as a living backdrop (2). Seated in canoes, the audience was literally surrounded on all sides by the river. This shift in position altered the audience's visual and sensorial experiences of the river, allowing audiences to touch its water, feel its current, and see the world from its waters.

No longer were audience members relegated to the role of subjects viewing a separate object (the river), they were instead invited to be subjects embedded in a living world. Spectators were required to contend with the river's current and could not avoid experiencing its autonomous power. Outdoor sites, like the Granite Falls riverfront or Alcatraz Island, require audiences to negotiate with uncontrollable elements like weather, noise, and passers-by, but the canoe setting added an additional level of give-and-take between the spectator and the site. Rather than moving through the landscape, the audience became subject to it, perhaps leveling the playing field between human and river a bit more. At the very least, the audience had to physically engage with the river's water. This requirement surprised some spectators who did not realize they would have to paddle, but expected to passively ride in the canoes (*With the Future* 22). For others, negotiating with the river left them sore in their paddling arm, an effort that, according to one spectator, "was a lot of work but...a lot of fun" (*With the Future* 21).

The canoe format also provided more opportunity for the audience to have an experience of the Minnesota River unmediated by the performance. Granted, it was the performance that drew everyone to the river in the first place, but the structure of *Paddling Theatre* provided transit times between scenes during which audiences were separated from the performers (see Figure 7). Unlike *Meandering River Walk* or *We Players'* productions, where audiences were led by performers, the canoes were self-navigated or helmed by professional guides from Wilderness Inquiry, an organization with a mission completely separate from the arts: “To connect people from all walks of life to the natural world through shared outdoor adventures” (“History & Mission—Wilderness Inquiry”). The *Paddling Theatre* audience became more than just a theatre audience, and even more than an actively



Figure 7. The audience paddles down the Minnesota River in between scenes in PlaceBase’s *Paddling Theatre* (photo by Sarina Otaibi, courtesy of CURE).

engaged audience—they became river paddlers, a role completely separable from the performance content.

For some, the experience of the river dominated their overall experience of the event, creating a framework that might be described as a river trip with theatre along the way. The primacy of the river experience is evident in several responses from PlaceBase’s audience survey:

It was wonderful, I can’t remember being in a voyageur kind of canoe experience before and that’s why I wanted to be part of it. What a wonderful, powerful thing that is, that nine people paddling on the Minnesota [River], sometimes ten or eleven [people].... And to have this theater experience interspersed along the shoreline is amazing. I don’t think I’ve heard of anything like it. (*With the Future* 17)

It was a very interesting experience for me because I’ve only been canoeing in my life a few times and so I’ve never been on that long of a canoe ride before.... It was a great experience. Especially being able to see the play by the side of the river there was kind of a nice little break from the floating down the river but otherwise, it was very peaceful, very interesting, very worthwhile experience.... (*With the Future* 18)

I was totally transported down the adventure of the river. Being pushed and pulled by the natural landscape and the narrative, occasionally being really drawn in to the scenes and being often in tranquil mind of my own and I would say, enraptured through the experience. (*With the Future* 19)

For these audience members, the performance “interspersed” the river trip, providing a “break” from their engagement with the river. Bob Greene, in a CNN story about the production, notes Gaylord’s response to the production:

He [Gaylord] said one of the nicest parts of the *Paddling Theatre*...afternoon was that “I didn't see anyone yakking in their canoes—I didn't see them on the phone. They seemed like they didn't want to be anywhere else in the world than where they were at that moment.”

Gaylord’s observation makes it clear that for many, time spent paddling on the river was not seen as downtime between scenes, but a highlight of the event. His

observation echoes Roy and May's contention that theatre can provide opportunities for people to encounter the world around them without distraction, strengthening their "sensitivity to place," as Lippard calls it (33). The direct experience of the river that *Paddling Theatre* provided had that kind of potential; at the very least, it provided an experience of nature that, for some, superseded the experience of the play.

Just as performance was used by We Players to bring audiences out to "hidden gems" in the Bay Area, *Paddling Theatre* brought many spectators to the river, many for the first time. According to an audience survey after the show, 54% said it was their first time on the Minnesota River. The novelty of the production also helped draw an audience from beyond the immediate area. PlaceBase's survey shows that 72 ZIP codes, 46 cities, and 5 states were represented in the audience, out of a pool of 172 responses (*With the Future* 15). Whatever reason each audience member had for attending, *Paddling Theatre* gave them the opportunity to experience and learn about a place they may have never paid attention to otherwise. Comments from audience members included:

Great intro to the river. 6 of us will be back!

Wonderful! Thank you so much. Love learning the history of the towns and the focus on river preservation.

I will be back to share this river with friends and family!

THANK YOU! This was amazing—a great way to connect to the history and stories of a place I'm only visiting for the second time. Makes me want to learn a lot more about this area and come back.

Coming here and experiencing something so unique, they did a good a job and a lot of people will remember the messages because this had a message and the delivery will stick with people. Sometimes when you go to something,

you get all this information, you're reading things in exhibits. This will stick with people. (*With the Future* 15-21)

These comments reflect several successful elements of *Paddling Theatre*: a clearer focus on the river and river care, a meaningful experience of place, and a inspiration to return to the area and further explore its "hidden gems."

PlaceBase's success in encouraging a connection between the Granite Falls community and the places they inhabit was confirmed in their third production, *Granite Falls: Saturday Nights!* The focus of this production was downtown Granite Falls in the middle of the twentieth century, a subject that repeatedly came up when Hanson and Gaylord were doing research for the first two productions: "We have heard more stories about downtown Granite Falls in the forties and fifties than about any other time or place," notes Gaylord (Hanson, "PBP"). Just as with the previous two Granite Falls productions, *Saturday Nights!* was created as a way for residents to celebrate their past and begin a conversation about their present and future. However, unlike the others, which found their origins in PlaceBase's partnership with CURE, the impetus for *Saturday Nights!* was the stories gathered from the community. Rather than coming in with a subject (the river) predetermined by their partnership with CURE (and funded by CURE's grant from the Bush Foundation), the focus of *Saturday Nights!* was determined by listening and responding to the voices in the community. The people of Granite Falls made it clear to Hanson and Gaylord that downtown was a significant place within the community and that they had concerns about its future.

Saturday Nights! also reflected Granite Falls' growing belief in the value of using performance to explore and enrich the town's sense of place. In a short

documentary made about the production, mayor Smiglewski clearly articulates a philosophy of site-specific, community-based performance: “It’s a chance for the community not only to think back, and to get a little nostalgic and kind of draw from what happened here [in downtown Granite Falls]...but also...‘What can it be again?’ and ‘What will it be again?’ and ‘Where will we go from here?’” (Hanson, “Granite Falls”). Scott Tedrick of the Tribune notes how a performance rooted in a shared experience of place was able to strengthen the community:

The production has been amazing in its ability to bring together people from multiple generations in a way that I haven’t seen happen in the community otherwise...it has created an avenue in which all these individuals are able to come together, so that there’s friendships being made [and] conversations happening for the first time. (Hanson, “Granite Falls”)

Both comments speak to the benefits PlaceBase’s productions have had for Granite Falls and hopefully, will continue to have in years to come.

Smiglewski and Tedrick were not the only ones to see the value of PlaceBase’s work in the community. When Hanson and Gaylord were unable to secure grant funding for the project, local business and organizations stepped in to fill the gap. *Saturday Nights!* was funded entirely by individuals, organizations, and business from Granite Falls and the surrounding area; forty percent of local business contributed to the project (*PlaceBase Productions*). As PlaceBase states on their website: “This production shows that a small community will invest in what it cares about.” The level of commitment, financial and otherwise, shown by Granite Falls in all three projects points to the importance of these places (the river and downtown) in their community. Would there have been such a strong embrace of these productions if they were not about the Minnesota River and downtown? Their

commitment also indicates an understanding that the multiple layers of history and meaning contained within a place must be brought to the surface by some means for them to be useful, as Tuan argues:

Past events make no impact on the present unless they are memorialized in history books, monuments, pageants, and solemn and jovial festivities that are recognized to be part of an ongoing tradition. An old city has a rich store of facts on which successive generations of citizens can draw to sustain and re-create their image of place. (174)

There was already a “rich store of facts” present within the community; PlaceBase’s productions simply helped to raise them to the surface for all to see.

After the performance event is over and Hanson and Gaylord leave town, the rights to the production do not leave with them, but stay in the community. Hanson explains:

With each production, the partnering organization that we work with has full rights to the script, the community can access the script. If they wanted to produce it again without us that would be absolutely awesome and encouraged. So it belongs here, because we can’t mount this show somewhere else.... It is of this landscape and it is written for the landscape and for the people who walk through the door at auditions. It lives here. (Pioneer Public Television)

Artist Richard Serra, defending his site-specific installation *Tilted Arc*, famously said, “To remove the work is to destroy [it].” Whether that was true of Serra’s work, I believe it does apply to PlaceBase’s. Not only do they make place their subject and create performances for certain spaces, but they enmesh their productions in the social fabric of the community. PlaceBase creates work that is truly *place*-specific; as Hanson says above, their work lives in Granite Falls.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Site-specific performance can do much to enrich our sense of place. It can facilitate rich experiences for audience members and create new stakeholders out of them. It can draw a community's attention to the multiplicity and interconnectedness inherent in the places they inhabit, those beloved and neglected. It can also raise questions regarding the value of those places and start a conversation about their use. "We may say that deeply-loved places are not necessarily visible, either to ourselves or to others," writes Tuan, but "places can be made visible by a number of means: rivalry or conflict with other places, visual prominence, and the evocative power of art, architecture, ceremonials and rites. Human places become vividly real through dramatization" (178). As Tuan points out, site-specific theatre has the potential to make our places visible and influence our thinking about them, but do we, as theatre artists and scholars, embrace that potential?

As artists and scholars engage with place, they also have a responsibility to challenge the dominant narratives that frame place and call into question inaccurate or incomplete ways of thinking. Site-specific theatre can be a tremendous tool in helping to connect the dots between people, places, histories, cultures, ideologies, and values. "Artists can make the connections visible," writes Lippard:

They can guide us through sensuous kinesthetic responses to topography, lead us from archaeology and landbased social history into alternative relationships to place. They can expose the social agendas that have formed the land, bring out multiple readings of places that mean different things to different people at different times rather than merely reflecting some of their beauty back into the marketplace or the living room. (Lippard 19)

Lippard recognizes that there is more an artist can do when engaging with site that simply feature its beauty. A park may provide a beautiful setting for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but does the world need another production of Shakespeare in the park?

Finally, site-specific artists should consider their treatment of place itself and ask, "How might this work impact this place?" Perhaps theatre artists could learn from another artist, a writer, whose body of work has been deeply connected to place. Wendell Berry has written extensively about his home of Kentucky, both in non-fiction essays and in his stories and novels about Port Williams, a fictional community loosely based on his home. Though the places in his life have sustained a career in writing, Berry does not see them only as resources to be utilized; in fact, he views his work as something that has deepened his experience of place. In the opening essay of his collection *Imagination in Place*, he writes:

I have tried (clumsily, I see) to define the places, real and imagined, where I have taken my stand and done my work. I have made the imagined town of Port William, its neighborhood and membership, in an attempt to honor the actual place where I have lived. By means of the imagined place, over the last fifty years, I have learned to see my native landscape and neighborhood as a place unique in the world, a work of God, possessed of an inherent sanctity that mocks any human valuation that can be put upon it. If anything I have written in this place can be taken to countenance the misuse of it, or to excuse anybody for rating the land as "capital" or its human members as "labor" or "resources," my writing would have been better unwritten. And then to hell with any value anybody may find in it "as literature." (15)

Berry's caveat offers up a challenge to reconsider an artist's responsibility to the places with which they work, a challenge I hope finds resonance in the coming years.

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