Diffractive Dramaturgy: A Performance Practice for Complicated Times

Draft for Performance Research: On Diffraction

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‘I don’t like theatre, but I like this.’

(Audience member, Dirty Market Rough Classics ‘Yerma’ at the Peckham Pelican Café, 2014)

Dirty Market, the theatre company I co-founded, runs a practical workshop called Rough Classics. This is an evolving practice where company directors Georgina Sowerby and I, along with a mixed group of enthusiastic professional and amateur actors, spend a block of time engaging with and exploring a Classic play-text, so far all within the (often) sealed and (for some) intimidating Western canon… We’ve now run six different Rough Classics workshops where the focus has been on facilitating the expression of participants, and opening up their associations with the text. We turn the material over, break it apart and throw the fragments together in unexpected ways as a means to explore the relatedness of complex contemporary lives to the chosen text, and to spark the dusty texts to life. For a while, like the Yerma audience member quoted above, we didn’t know if we could call this process Theatre: the workshop performances were messy, tangled, fragmented and quite unlike Theatre we had studied, respected, enjoyed, ourselves tried to emulate - yet the new work engaged… ‘Devising meets Applied Performance’ might provide a loose definition of the process - but does not fully encompass what was happening, what we were seeing, and in a weird way the categorisation serves to close down the process. This lack of a satisfactory vocabulary to describe our practice, output and its potential effects has led us to search for new-to-us terms, and this search has in turn helped open up and develop the work itself.

In this essay, I offer, as a theatre-maker an exploration of how aspects of posthuman theory, and in particular diffraction as theorised by Donna Haraway (2004) and Karen Barad (2007), can be used as maps, templates, prisms, to develop a diffractive dramaturgy, a way of making and *audiencing* work in direct response to the challenges emerging in our time. A diffracted perspective speaks to current critical frameworks; it is part of a new materialist world-view. As theatre-makers, we are involved in the business of working together to consciously create collective experiences in response to the personal, political turmoil and ecological crises of our age, therefore finding new ways to be within nature (including our own and others) has become not only an essential part of that activity, but the act itself.

DIFFRACTIVE

This account begins as a classic ‘amateur science meets theatre practice’ narrative.

I first encountered diffraction in a school science lab. We did both the two-slit particle / wave experiment and looked at light rays through prisms. I remember the wonder the class felt, seeing the diffraction patterns and rainbow sprays: white light containing the colours of the rainbow, a single particle can travelling through two different slits at the same time… Seemingly impossible realities, counter-intuitive and yet there, made manifest before our very eyes.

For me, theorising diffraction with contemporary posthumanism has become synonymous with challenging normative impressions and expectations. It suggests more complex possibilities for *what’s out there* and it proposes other ways - perhaps necessarily inappropriate ways - of perceiving, challenging first impressions and the habitual and recognised structures, denying the reductive taxonomic impulse and problematising the way we make sense of, and find meaning in, the world around us.

In *Diffraction and Reading Diffractively*, Evelin Geerts and Iris van der Tuin suggest that diffractive thinking is a, ‘critical and difference-attentive mode of thought’. This ‘difference-attentive’ approach encourages a shift away from the traditional dualistic and separation-based models that structure thinking via categorisations, and towards a model where, ‘entities diffractively crisscross, interfere and co-establish one another.’ (Geerts & van der Tuin 2016)

The Rough Classics workshops encouraged a similar dismissal of the traditional categorisations; our attempt to help participants relate to and engage with the chosen play-texts, led us all to a blending of personal and story narratives, layering them together and forming a performance-as-interference-pattern, that needed to be experienced with a fresh, difference-attentive perspective. Together we created new openings into the plays, gaps in odd places creating unexpected outcomes with the original text. The participants who had entered the room as ‘professionals and amateurs’ became criss-crossing entities co-establishing one another.

In theatre, making work tends to be done in the company of others. In this collaborative craft, how we make together is intrinsically linked to what gets made. At a 2019 talk given at Central School of Speech and Drama, the New York theatre-maker Anne Bogart said, being part of a theatre company was for her, a political and philosophical practice as well as a creative one. She described it as, ‘an ongoing attempt to try out new *ways of* *being* together’. (Bogart 2019) Where Enlightenment paradigms still dominate, and habitual learning structures are built on humanist binaries such as subjectivity and objectivity, a static and fixed model surfaces that cannot cope with our growing awareness of the complexities of perspectives that we necessarily must take into account if we are to find a responsible way of ‘being together’ in this world. This is one area where posthumanist scholars are challenging traditional methodologies:

The posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism but goes further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualising the human subject. (Braidotti 2013 p.37)

To allow the possibility that a white light contains the colours of the rainbow / to allow the possibility that this play-text might reveal a multiplicity of effects and meanings in this unexpected person’s hands…

I don’t like theatre, but I like this.

DRAMATURGY

Broadly speaking, dramaturgy is the theory and practice of dramatic composition. The role of the dramaturg is itself however fluid, responding to the needs of particular creative processes. For Duška Radosavljevic’, in her 2009 article, *The Need to Keep Moving,* she says that, for her,

Being on the margins, both literally and metaphorically, my practice as a dramaturg has by and large consisted of bridge-building, on the one hand and on the other, a negotiation of frontiers between theory and practice, between writers and directors, between the show and the audience, between theatre and academia and sometimes between different cultures, too. (Radosavljevic’ 2009 p.48)

This boundary practice intersects well with the image of a diffraction interference pattern; but to expand on Duška’s *bridge-building* analogy, a diffractive dramaturgy would function with similar purpose, but linger on the bridges rather than using them solely as instruments to draw different ideas together, or perhaps explore the crevasse / boundary zone itself. By acknowledging and drawing attention to the space between differing elements, a *difference-attentive dramaturgy* foregrounds the moments of interference and transformation as a special site of interest. A diffractive dramaturgy follows an impulse to leave the bridge but stay in the in-between space, to get in amongst the messy entanglements that resist categorisations. It is perhaps an encouragement to stay open for a little longer than one might otherwise feel comfortable doing. Diffraction does not bridge one thing with another, it layers one upon the other and smudges the existing delineations.

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad uses the concept of diffraction to develop her new materialist theories. She gives the concept a central role in her discussions, stating its importance for her conceptualising of both physics and philosophy. She adds that, ‘Diffraction is also an apt metaphor for describing the methodological approach that I use of reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specifics of relations of difference and how they matter.’ (Barad 2007 p.71)

The image of reading one insight through another, while attending to difference, is further developed via the physical phenomena of wave superpositioning and the imaging of waves via interference patterns.

Unlike particles, waves can overlap at the same point in space. When this happens, their amplitudes combine to form a composite wave form… the resultant wave is a sum of the effects of each individual component wave; that is, it is a combination of the disturbances created by each wave individually. This way of combining effects is called *superposition.* (Barad 2007 p.76)

Our *Rough Classics* approach to exploring a play-text echoes this combining and compositing that Barad mentions when discussing wave behaviour. The actor changes the text and the text changes the actor, creating a new and affective composite to meet the audience. My attempt to define a diffractive dramaturgy is therefore to show the positive and creative potential for making and *audiencing* performance that, to use one more physics analogy from Barad, ‘results from the relative differences (in amplitude and phase) between the overlapping wave components.’ (Barad 2007 p.77)

THE BLACK BOX

Scientists use the term Black Box to describe processes where the inputs and outputs are known, but where they have little or no understanding of what happens during the process. Our fascination with *Rough Classics* performances led us to develop another project, a stand-alone performance event that became, for us, a theatrical black box.

For the first few *Rough Classics* workshops, after all the material had been generated, Georgina and I as co-directors would sit down and collage it all together into a final performance. Dramaturgically, we worked in a similar way as is described here by lighting designer / theatre director David Harradine in his book on the making of the performance *Invisible Line: Brighton,* ‘In short, it was about observing, distilling and organising patterns, and finding ways of extracting an emotional as well as conceptual content.’ (Harradine 2011 p.129)

However, this ‘distilling’ top-down process seemed incongruous with the equitable essence of the exploration we were interested in. We did not want to impose existing structures or interpretations, but rather, as discussed above, ‘combine to form a composite.’ (Barad 2007 p. 77) The participants had joined us partly because they wanted to take more ownership of their creative lives. We wanted to find a more horizontal structure where all the participants had creative agency and responsibility.

Part of the process of taking the plays apart and exploring the fragments, had involved playing a task-based game. To do this, we included separate fragments of the play’s actions, provocations, lines of text, gestures, images, and performed responses to those elements. These were written onto A5 filing cards and then shuffled and placed face down in the space. The ‘game’ would involve participants being both the audience and the performers; they could draw a card and then watch the action play out in the space, and choose when, where and how they would perform their task. When they felt that the task was complete, they would return to become audience again, until they had the urge to draw another card: a kind of indeterminate theatre.

For the Black Box events, this game is played as a stand-alone theatre event, using a page-long short story as provocation and a deck of pre-prepared tasks. These events are open to the public with no prior preparation required. (For more information about the Black Box game, see www.dirtymarket.co.uk/workshops)

In 2015, we performed the Black Box game as part of the Sprint Festival which showcases new, original work at Camden People’s Theatre in London. I began proceedings by explaining the nature of the performance, the rules of the game, to the mix of people gathered in the auditorium. After I had finished, there was a long, silent and fairly tense moment of collective hesitation. Although about half of the participants knew of our work and what was expected, the rest were looking a little stunned. But after the first few cards were drawn, and a couple of bold initiators had taken to the stage, a trickle of action quickly turned into a torrent. Both stage and auditorium were alive with gestures, declarations, watchful eyes, whispered asides, surreal encounters; a kaleidoscope of comings and goings. Sometimes cacophonous, sometimes still, elements and images of the story diffracted through the lives of those involved, diffracted again through the tasks and the experience of all doing this together, creating an unpredictable, engaging and (necessarily) unrepeatable experience.

It was a pretty unique experience to share with a bunch of strangers… Rather than watching other people experience things on stage, you do it yourself. The result is quite amazing. (Sophie Leaner, Camden People’s Theatre Reviewer – Black Box March 2015)

IMMERSIVE KALEIDOSCOPING

Not long after I began thinking of the Black Box practice as a diffractive dramaturgy (where the traditional line between performer and audience is dissolved, the job of *audiencing* is experienced and enacted quite differently to normal), I visited Olafur Eliasson’s retrospective exhibition at London’s Tate Modern. In one artwork, *Your Spiral View* (2002), a short journey through a tube of spiral patterned mirror shards, my experience was of a fragmenting or shattering of my surrounding objective reality, and as I moved through, it seemed to turn reality into one big immersive kaleidoscopic effect. A variation of this experience was had in *Your Blind Passenger* (2010), a walk through a 45foot long fog tunnel where all sense of perspective and situation is lost as the viewer/participant slowly moves through a warm dense coloured mist. Without the habitual visual markers (walls, shadows, corners) one uses to locate oneself in space, I could not make sense of myself in relation to the objects around me and so therefore lost my sense of separateness from the world; for a few fleeting moments, I experienced *a sense of being without boundaries.*

The diffused or diffracted realities these exhibits engender are playful ways to disrupt the habitual ways of seeing, or even ways of being. In the exhibition catalogue, that includes a series of conversations between Eliasson and collaborators, psychologist Barry Smith speaks of their shared interest.

Let’s find ways in which you can explore things beyond your first impressions and your first reactions, and this will make your experiences much richer, more enjoyable, and not limit you to immediate likes and dislikes. This will give you a better understanding of yourself and others. (Barry C Smith in Godfrey 2019 p.87)

A diffractive dramaturgy, illustrated above in the description of the Black Box theatre event, shares much with Eliasson and Smith: that diffused and diffracted realities challenge first impressions and make us rethink the material, ourselves with the material, our material selves. The process of *immersive kaleidoscoping* disrupts the heavy tracings of existing knowledge and perceptions, offering both a different view of reality and most interestingly, a different perspective on what constitutes the act of viewing. It points again to a potential gap in time and space allowing us to experiment with Bogart’s *being in company* and thus offers a social, even moral, dimension to diffractive dramaturgy.

CASE STUDY – FLUTE THEATRE

But who are we *being* *in company* with as theatre makers?

There are definite parallels in the dynamic and provocative NTGent manifesto (www.ntgent.be/en/manifest). The call for a mix of professional and amateur performers, no dominant existing text, multiple performance languages and a requirement that productions perform in different countries, all suggest an objective of changing the way we experience and relate to narratives towards a more horizontal and diffractive way of making.

However, I am going to look closer to home at another example.

Kelly Hunter MBE and her company Flute Theatre, create immersive and inclusive theatre performances with professional actors, autistic children, their families, teachers and friends. It is worth noting many of these children and their families have not been able, for a variety of reasons, to attend traditional theatre events and thus are often left socially excluded and/or isolated, so for Hunter and her company, the need to shift the traditional way people relate to narratives has been the focus of their work.

For over a decade Hunter, with her company, has been exploring and developing exercises and games that can help create an accepting collective space that, as well as focusing attention, can also, ‘heighten children’s awareness of themselves and provide an opportunity to explore emotions, which may otherwise be overlooked.’ (Hunter 2015 p.1)

The really surprising part of Hunter’s work is that she does this using Shakespeare’s plays; texts that are often perceived as challenging, dense, even inaccessible. The complex verse, and sometimes archaic and difficult language might not be the obvious choice when searching for material to use for workshops and performances with autistic children, who may be nonverbal. But Hunter, an associate actor of the Royal Shakespeare Company before forming Flute, believes that rhythms and core imagery found in Shakespeare’s verse, are fundamental to her method of creating shared understanding and opening the potential for communication with autistic children.

Shakespeare’s definitions are a poetic exploration of how it *feels* to be alive, how it feels to expressively communicate. This is a fundamental concept of his writing and was my jumping off point for inventing this work. (Hunter 2016 p.4)

Starting with a *Heartbeat Circle* (Hunter 2016), Hunter uses the verse’s iambic pentameter structure, and text images of love, to slowly and patiently create a rhythmic entrainment to affect and hold the group. This process cannot be rushed or forced, and may take many sessions to accomplish for some children, but when it does happen, participants become aware of a new shared space together, an unfamiliar landscape, rich with potential.

The exercises and games that follow the Heartbeat Circle, depend on which Shakespeare text Hunter and the company are sharing with the workshop. To date she has created a series of games, when *played* together, that tell the story of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream,* *The Tempest* and *Pericles.* I use the phrase ‘tell the story’ but the phrase could be slightly misleading - it implies a definitive version of the story which Flute do some kind of rendition of. What I would like to suggest though, is Hunter and her actors are actually diffracting Shakespeare into a different experience.

In, *The promise of Monsters*, Donna Haraway *states that,*

Diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of difference appear.” (Haraway 2004 p.70)

The workshop games, by forming an experience of narrative through gesture, rhythm, physical play and group sharing, are setting up new ways of perceiving and experiencing Shakespeare’s plays. Hunter uses Shakespeare’s texts and her team of skilled actors to define a landscape her workshop participants can share in, make with and compose. A diffracted Shakespeare does not, “produce ‘the same’ displaced,” to go back to Haraway, but, ‘maps where the *effects* of difference appear.’

ENTERTAINING A ‘NON-NEUROTYPICAL’ SCHEMA

In the first chapter of their 2014 book, *Thought in the Act*, affect theorists Brian Massumi and Erin Manning discuss reality as experienced by sufferers of autism as described by authors like Tito Mukhopadhyay. Over the course of the chapter, they offer a perspective on reality as experienced by people with autism. While being careful never to underestimate the struggles and pain people with autism can experience, they show that the factors that can make reality overwhelming for them amount to an experience of an uncensored reality, a raw and open experience.

To experience the texture of the world ‘without discrimination’ is not indifference… It is to pay equal attention to the full range of life’s texturing complexity, with an entranced and unhierarchized commitment to the way in which the organic and the inorganic, color, sound, smell, and rhythm, perception and emotion, intensely interweave into the ‘aroundness’ of a textured world, alive with difference. (Massumi & Manning 2014 p.4)

They propose the use of the term, *entrainment*, as a description of the learnt and, on the whole, unconscious processes that facilitate the recognition of surroundings, and the foregrounding of certain features that help the *neurotypical* create and maintain a

workable experience of the world.

This, for the most part, fixed and entrenched hierarchy of perceived phenomena, allows the neurotypical to ‘read’ situations quickly according to the normative expectations. For the person with autism however, it can be a struggle to recognise and read the normative hierarchies of perceived phenomena. In an example given in the book, Mukhopadhyay describes how he cannot focus on the voice speaking to him as the shadows that play across the room struggle for attention in his conception of the room he has just entered. Massumi and Manning describe this as an open field of experiences, where there is no habitual schema for the focusing of the mass of experiences. ‘Caught in the middling of this event, Mukhopadhyay is not the maker of the scene. He attends to its dance, co-composing with it.’ (Massumi & Manning 2014 p.5)

This can lead to complexities in processing in relation to the neurotypical schema. The person with autism may be drawn into a different collection of narratives, emanating from the colour and patterns on the window panes, and not able to focus on the voice that is attempting to speak to them. This experience is described as entertaining all potentials. It is different from the habitual and socialised experience of the neurotypical which immediately focus on the human elements in any situation to the detriment of other non-human elements. Massumi and Manning’s discussion interestingly flips our habitual reading of these conditions, by offering the neurotypical experience as socially enabling but also limiting, and the autistic one, as socially debilitating but offering a more diffracted experiential view. What’s on offer here is the potential to learn from these non-neurotypical experiences, to learn to see beyond the human entrainments, and to entertain more open experiences.

‘This foregrounding of the immediate field of experience we call *entertainment.* Entertainment is prior to the distinction between active and passive, subject and object. Entertainment is captivation in a dance of attention.’ (Italics in original Manning & Massumi 2014 p.8) This deeper function of entertainment – to captivate attention prior to the formation of binaries, reminds me of my experience of walking through Eliasson’s colour tunnel, and links to Haraway’s statement that diffraction maps the effects of difference rather than its delineations. This is an important distinction. There is an insistence here on avoiding entrainment, or categorisation. A want to stay open / ambiguous, in order *to feel* for a way to move beyond the limitations of first impressions.

According to Flute Theatre testimonials ([flutetheatre.co.uk](http://futetheatre.co.uk)), as well as having an extraordinary effect on participants, Heartbeat Method has led to a re-evaluation of Shakespeare for some of the acting company who lead the workshops. The habitual / entrained frameworks for reading and interpreting text: textual analysis, structural analysis, literary and historical criticisms, etymology and semiotics, semantics, etc. in this process, need to be left to one side. Hunter and her team have to reconfigure from an ‘open field experience’, if she is to find a way to build communication and understanding with her fellow composers, the workshop participants. To learn to see a text without entrained reading systems, is to see the text as an interference pattern – a diffracted Shakespeare.

This also parallels the experiences of Black Box participants. A diffractive dramaturgy therefore is built from discovering and experiencing a new topography of effects. As with Hunter’s workshop games, the performance / text grows out of the ongoing adjustments made to reach out and find connection to each and every child. It has been diffracted into moments, stimulations, images and experiences so the text is more like an interference pattern, revealing the effects of the experience of the text, rather than an objectified analysis of it.

The Hunter Heartbeat Method purposefully targets specific areas of communicative challenge for those on the spectrum and employs Shakespeare’s plays as the vehicle through which communication can be made more accessible and enjoyable. (Hunter 2016 p.xi)

To consciously dismantle or see through the habitual entrainments that dominate both the behaviour of collaborators with each other, and the way the group looks at the world, looking is not enough (for there are no short cuts to easy recognitions). In such an open landscape, *seeing* entails experiencing new affects: a tentacular approach to gathering material, and most importantly, a gathering where the gatherer is also the stuff being gathered. It is the sense of the observer not being separate to that which is being observed.

Hunter’s Heartbeat Method is the slow and careful process of applied curiosity.

Echoing the need to look beyond first impressions. Carol A. Taylor’s essay points to the particular need to find a posthuman perspective if new ways of seeing and being (*in company*) together are to be explored. Taylor, referring to Anna Tsing suggests:

How to do this? Like Tsing I suggest that, ‘our first step is to bring back curiosity. Unencumbered by the simplifications of progress narratives, the knots and pulses of patchiness are there to explore.’ The question then becomes: what happens if? (Taylor 2018 p.373)

ENTANGLEMENTS AND THE OPEN FIELD

Subject and object, wave and particle, position and momentum do not exist outside of specific intra-actions that enact cuts that make separations – not absolute separations, but only contingent separations – within phenomena. (Barad 2014 p.175)

Making work diffractively is about acknowledging *the intra-action* of all things. This concept, proposed by Barad (2007)*,* offers a different way of conceptualising reality where one does not start with the premise that we are of separate stuff to that which surrounds us, but where all matter is entangled. A thought, an idea or perception, is just a perspective or *agential cut* where a viewpoint is taken; there is no objective truth in such an arrangement, and an acknowledgment of this relativism is central to developing an ethical responsibility for one’s own perspective. An entangled perspective, therefore acknowledges the *un-fixity* of that being explored, and the *un-fixity* in that which is doing the observations. It questions the entrained particular / particle approaches and like the diffraction interference pattern, substantiates through affects.

In terms of the collaborative devising work in Rough Classics, existing entrained learning habits (for example end-gaming, being fearful of remaining creatively open etc.) can position the maker at some remove from the work. The temptation for the devisor participant is to be a spectator in their own process, not a participant. Part of the diffractive process within devising therefore is an entangling, an embodied experience of the idea: ‘We are part of the nature we seek to understand.’ (Barad 2007 p. 26)

This posthuman perspective is illustrated by Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei in their essay on posthuman research, *Thinking with an Agentic Assemblage in Posthuman Inquiry,* in which they draw on the work of Susan Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter,* to illustrate the entangled nature of maker and matter.

Rather than identifying the discrete agents in the assemblage, we, as researchers attempting post human methodological practices, consider forces, vitalities, things, that act upon and through vital materialities to produce the assemblage that we also become with/in. (Jackson and Mazzei in Taylor C. A & Hughes C. 2016 p.105)

Diffractive dramaturgy offers more potential as we stay within the open field of perception for as long as possible. As with Flute performances, Rough Classics, and the Black Box game, diffractive dramaturgy challenges us to try to resist showing pre-packaged material and learn to see and hear and feel effects of difference, rather than the markers of difference - the lines of categorisation. Staying with not-knowing / no-product for as long as possible, without resorting to pre-existing entrained or subjective perspectives, reminds us: ‘There is a politics to how we distribute our attention.’ (Ahmed 2008 p.30)

In a similar vein, anthropologist Andreas Roepstoerff in conversation with Eliasson suggests,

So, an experience seems to be neither a passive stream of information into the body nor a set of expectations about the world; it is closer to being a form of space that you can delve down into. And, as you go back to it, your experience may be radically transformed. (Roepstorff in Godfrey 2019 p.155)

A diffractive dramaturgy is not utilising the tool box of prepared or entrained effects, in order to deliver a tried and tested version of a theatre experience. It is an exploration of how not to rationalise, select, and categorise material, but a way of revealing the observation of material as it plays lightly across our beings. All participants offer themselves as an interference pattern which entertains difference. Patience and a readiness to remain in a state of ambiguity are needed as one adjusts to become the ground for an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of affects and impressions. ‘To be surprised by what we see,’ Bennett quotes Thoreau in *Vibrant Matter* – ‘is the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen.’ (Bennett 2010 p.5)

END

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