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## The Inventorists: Making a 'Theatre of Mixed Means' for Public Spaces

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The Inventorists: Making a ‘Theatre of Mixed Means’ for Public Spaces

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

MASTER OF CREATIVE ARTS - RESEARCH

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

JULIA COTTON

SCHOOL OF ARTS, ENGLISH AND MEDIA

2015

## Thesis Certification

### CERTIFICATION

I, Julia Cotton declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Creative Arts – Research, in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Julia Cotton

30 June 2016

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## **Abstract**

This thesis documents and analyses the process of making a new performance work called *The Inventorists*, by Julia Cotton working in collaboration with Russell Garbutt. *The Inventorists* forms the practical component of the Master of Creative Arts – Research degree (MCA-R). The creative research seeks to demonstrate strategies for generating performance material through improvisation, building on a long-term collaborative process, and drawing on the very different art form backgrounds of each performer, which encompasses ballet, clowning, community theatre and illusion. *The Inventorists* asks what strategies can artists put in place to create a ‘theatre of mixed means’, which is both communicable to a broad audience, and being experienced in alternative performance spaces, accessible. It also seeks to assess the contemporary relevance of strategies initiated in the early eighties and to ask whether this form of ‘visual’ theatre is still relevant today.

The supporting exegetical research paper seeks to contextualise this visual and physical performance work through a critical discussion of the work of Etcetera Theatre Company (1983 – 1999), of which Cotton and Garbutt were founding members. It does so by briefly exploring the cultural context of Australia during the 1980s, particularly in Adelaide, where Etcetera was formed. It examines the creative process of Etcetera in the context of both past and current practice in order to explore the role of choreography in physical performance, the generation of new material through improvisation, the recycling of existing material and what it means to perform in public spaces. It concludes with a discussion of the process of making the new performance work *The Inventorists*, and how the work of Etcetera has evolved in the intervening years.

# ***The Inventorists: Making a ‘Theatre of Mixed Means’ for Public Spaces***

## **Introduction**

This exegetical research paper seeks to contextualise the making of a new performance work, called *The Inventorists: An Inventory of Lives through Objects*, (hereafter referred to as *The Inventorists*) described – using Richard Kostelanetz’s term, as a ‘theatre of mixed means’, by which is meant, work that:

... generally [eschews] the language of words and includes the means (or media) of music and dance, light and odor (both natural and chemical), sculpture and painting, as well as the new technologies of film, recorded tape, amplification systems, radio and closed-circuit television (Kostelanetz, 1968, pp. 3&4).

As Kostelanetz goes on to note, what is ‘intrinsic’ to a theatre of mixed-means, ‘is the most liberal definition possible of theatrical activity: any situation where some people perform for others, regardless of whether or not the spectators intend to be an audience’ (1968, pp. 7&8). This essay argues that the work of Etcetera Theatre Company (ETC) also known as Etcetera, of which I am a founding member, an independent ensemble of artists performing primarily on the streets, and which emerged in Adelaide, South Australia in 1983, may also be understood in these terms. The Etcetera Duo,<sup>i</sup> a latter day manifestation comprising another founding member, Russell Garbutt and myself, also draws on any means at its disposal to create theatre that communicates to a broad audience. As this research paper argues, taking the performance out of the theatre, and into spaces where audiences can access the work without either paying, or requiring ‘theatrical literacy’ or needing to understand the cultural conventions of theatre, makes it available to many.

The methodology for this exegesis could be likened to going into a storage space and unpacking boxes, looking through archival material of Etcetera, photographs and old programs, sorting out what was relevant and applicable to this project. Perhaps it is not surprising therefore that the performance made for this research Masters, *The Inventorists*, takes a storage space as its defining image. Research was also undertaken online, uncovering the fact that there is little, if any public documentation of Etcetera.<sup>ii</sup> Acknowledging that Etcetera mostly appeared in unconventional settings and was therefore rarely recorded and that the work was presented in a time when the internet was in its infancy, are omissions that might be partially redressed by this research paper. Further readings of histories of contemporary theatre practice have uncovered moments of familiarity and recognition, including the realisation that Etcetera shared a philosophy and approach that was experienced by many other artists and companies practicing at that time.

The opportunity to create a new work, *The Inventorists*, has allowed for reflection on Etcetera's past work. By documenting the creative process it was possible to gain a more objective perspective of the work. The process of reading, writing and reflecting on the history of Etcetera and then bringing that thinking into the creative process meant that what were previously more intuitive or organic processes of building a new work became more explicit over time. Using the case study and the supporting research it became apparent that there is a systematic approach to our creative process, even if that process relies more on intuition and improvisation, it does have an order, and even rules, developed perhaps unconsciously over the years. *The Inventorists*, while revisiting the earlier work of Etcetera was a more personal project, and also reflected

the nature of the current work with my colleague, Russell Garbutt. Here was an opportunity to analyse how our creative process has evolved, how it related to past work and how it might be influenced by the work of other like-minded artists. Devising *The Inventorists* gave us the chance to link our past with the present, to reaffirm our approach and in this way *The Inventorists*, while a new work, exemplified a number of the qualities understood as characteristic of Etcetera's work and philosophy. These characteristics are discussed in more detail in the section - The Process.

This research paper therefore asks whether performance strategies initially developed in the nineteen eighties are relevant today. It explores the role of choreography in physical performance, the generation of new material through improvisation, the recycling of existing material and what it means to perform in public spaces. *The Inventorists*, a performance created by Russell Garbutt and myself performing as the Etcetera Duo, explores these questions.

## **Background**

By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists (Goldberg, 1979, p. 6).

According to several commentators (Goldberg 1979, Shank 1982, Gallasch 2003, for instance) the 1970s and early 1980s saw a distinct movement away from 'conventional theatre', such as naturalistic drama, and traditional forms of dance – usually the ballet - and opera undertaken in proscenium arch theatres. Community theatre, alternative and experimental theatre, performance art and site-specific performance, all emerged, according to American theatre scholar, Theodore Shank, as:

... an alternative to the theatre of the dominant complacent middle-class society which tended to perpetuate the status quo in its aesthetics, politics, working methods, and techniques (1982, p. 1).

Australia was not immune from these movements, shaped by sweeping social changes that sought to create alternatives not just to the conventions of traditional art forms, but to challenge social and political convention. In the 1970s many Australian artists were drawn to Adelaide, including Cotton and Garbutt, where a sympathetic government led by Premier Don Dunstan supported, even championed the arts.

By 1979, Adelaide was probably the most notable Australian capital in its concern with the arts ... Provision for the arts, as well as its variety and excellence of their presentation, had advanced increasingly during the years of the Dunstan government.

(Horne, 1981, p. 205).

On a wave of optimism and with financial support from the relatively new Adelaide Festival Centre, Etcetera Theatre Company formed in 1983. Adelaide provided a fertile context for young artists at that time. As Australian journalist, social commentator and author, Donald Horne wrote, ‘Adelaide has the advantage of being comparatively small and compact as a community... It is an excellent setting for the germination and flowering of new ideas’ (1981, pp. 207-8).

On a practical level it was easy to get around in Adelaide, and this proximity helped considerably in creating a supportive artistic community. Alternative cabaret collective, *The Castanet Club*<sup>iii</sup> who originated from a similarly small community in Newcastle in 1984, also identified their small town status as an advantage, because it had what they described as, ‘...relatively easy access to resources, rehearsal space, cheap hire

equipment, performing spaces and above all, we are never more than a bike ride away from each other!’ (Cheek & Abbott, 1987, p. 148).

Most importantly, Adelaide provided significant opportunities for company members to experience work by international, contemporary theatre practitioners at the biennial Adelaide Festival of Arts. Many of these productions had a profound effect, being incredibly inspiring to a young collective engaged in making new forms of work. These influences are discussed in more detail in the Contextual and Literature Review of this exegesis.

Etcetera Theatre Company, evolved organically among an artistic group of like-minded friends. The involvement of artists from different backgrounds and the mix of high and low art forms (known variously as mixed media, cross art form, and hybrid arts) was typical of those artists and companies wishing to distance themselves from conventional theatre often understood and interpreted by these artists as dull and inaccessible. In the first few years of the company, members included at least two musicians, a dancer, an illusionist, an artist and two actors. This dynamic of a mix of artists was an ongoing characteristic throughout the company’s existence (see appendix 1), and therefore the sharing and exchange of skills became an essential part of Etcetera’s philosophy. This was firstly because it created equality among the members of the group as no one art form was seen as more important than another, and secondly, because it challenged each member to learn new skills. By experimenting and diversifying it was felt that something more interesting and unusual would result. It also meant that the work had to be relatively simple or accessible for those members of the company who lacked particular skills to be able to learn and to some extent master them. For instance, instead



of complex dance choreography, movement sequences were based on simple walking routines and patterns, while music often relied on percussive rhythms and repetition. Being primarily a visual theatre company some of the imagery created was again deceptively simple but also effective (see figure 1). This apparent simplicity in performance made the work immediate and easily accessible to audiences. It was also paradoxically quite sophisticated by being refined and minimal. Etcetera managed to create a strong impact by simply standing still in the right place at the right time.



Figure 1. Etcetera, Singapore Festival, 1990; photographer unknown.

The company name, 'etcetera' as defined by The Macquarie Dictionary, means, 'and others; and so on; and so forth' (1995, p. 596) suggesting a continuum. Naming the company this way reflected the multiplicity of performers; the look of the company with all members of the group dressed in identical suits (see figure 2) and the sense of equality within the group.<sup>iv</sup> The theme of conformity as a construct for the work was almost a contradiction to the desire to be 'alternative' or 'different' but it was also a tongue-in-cheek statement about the need to belong and be accepted. Also resulting from this emphasis on conformity was the androgyny of the performers; while the company consisted of men and women, no distinction was made in appearance.



Figure 2. Etcetera, Brisbane World Expo, 1988; left to right: Glenn Rafferty, Julia Cotton, Martin Hughes, Ian Farr and Russell Garbutt; photographer unknown.

Entertainment for all types of audiences was another important consideration and Etcetera appeared in a wide range of contexts and venues so that ‘entertainment for all and entertainment anywhere’ became an integral part of the Etcetera manifesto. This came from a desire to be part of the everyday experience for the person/s who witnessed the appearance of the Etcetera performers. As Heddon and Milling point out in *Devising Performance* (2006, p. 67) ‘The spectator was, ideally, an equal participant.’ There was a sense of immediacy to the work and the fact that we brought theatre to the audience rather than the other way around, lent the ‘performance’ a very different quality to being on a stage. The essence of this approach perhaps harks back to some of the earliest traditions of entertainment from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries – the medieval minstrels and troubadours of the Middle Ages, who performed in the court but also toured the countryside and took their music and entertainment to the people. While members of Etcetera saw the company as forging a fresh approach to performance, they also recognised and identified with age-old traditions such as the travelling troubadours.





Figure 3. Etcetera, Sydney 1990, left to right: Katrina Sedgwick, Ian Farr, Russell Garbutt, Wayne Freer and Julia Cotton; photographer Ross Hipwell.

Street theatre and outdoor performance was the mainstay of Etcetera's early work. Members of Etcetera enjoyed the opportunity, and sometimes the challenge of adapting to many different locations, seeing them as a setting for performance and taking advantage of the different 'backdrops' provided by the city and urban landscapes (see figure 3). In selecting sites for performance the company would consider whether to use the site as a backdrop for a stationary presentation or a background to a passing, promenade-like appearance. Imposing edifices such as the Art Gallery of South Australia or Parliament House in Adelaide made perfect backdrops for appearances by

the Etcetera Business Men as each building has substantial and magnificent Corinthian columns (see figures 4 and 5), providing a symmetry, which was reflected in the choreography of the Business Men. Performing on the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House or in Australia Square in Sydney with their ‘modern’ type of architecture, framed Etcetera’s performances to very different effect (see figure 6). City streets, whether in Australian capital cities or international cities such as Singapore, provided a background for travelling performance. Escalators, malls, train stations all had particular qualities that could be utilised. Even crossing a street became a site for performance: at Sydney Town Hall for instance, the Business Men would simply skip to the centre of the intersection and back again, as pedestrians walked across the road.



Figure 4. Etcetera, Adelaide Festival, 1986; photographer unknown.



Figure 5. Etcetera, Adelaide Festival, 1986; photographer unknown.

Etcetera's principle intention with outdoor performance was to reach as many people as possible and appeal to those who would not otherwise choose to go to the theatre, creating instead a kind of lowbrow theatre for the masses. There were other street theatre groups with similar aims that developed in the early to mid 1980s in Australia, particularly those that evolved from a background in Community Theatre. At the time, street theatre and outdoor performance were considered 'alternative', and as Kim Spinks, a founding member of Sydney-based Death Defying Theatre (now Urban Theatre Projects)<sup>v</sup> wrote at the time, '...we still suffer from the hauteur of the arts mandarins, who see street theatre as peripheral' (1987, p. 158). This attitude prevailed well into the nineties. Bim Mason author of *Street Theatre and Other Outdoor*



*Performance* (1992) notes somewhat sardonically, ‘...well really it’s not proper theatre is it? So outdoor theatre remains the unappreciated outsider...’ (1992, p. 2). Today street theatre and outdoor performance are not only accepted but in certain places expected. It was not always so. Etcetera, along with other companies like Legs on the Wall<sup>vi</sup> and Stalker Theatre<sup>vii</sup> are among the pioneers of street theatre in Australia.



Figure 6. Etcetera, Sydney, 1991, left to right: Julia Cotton, Glenn Rafferty, Paul Blackwell, Russell Garbutt and Carlos Russell; photographer Sally Colechin.

In this sense Etcetera’s decision to abandon the protection of the proscenium arch to perform on the street, using the cityscape as their backdrop could be seen as a political act. In 1983 in Adelaide buskers were discouraged from performing outdoors and were restricted by having to apply for special licences. Performing outdoors was, at that time a radical thing to do, an attitude that Etcetera embraced wholeheartedly. In most cases the work was greatly appreciated by its unsuspecting audience precisely because it was



unexpected but occasionally there were ructions. Not only were the audience taken by surprise, but from time to time, so were the performers, as in 1991, when an Etcetera member was pushed into rose bushes outside Glasgow railway station in Scotland. Presumably the disgruntled passerby didn't take kindly to being offered a business card by one of the Etcetera Business Men, and perhaps they didn't realise it was part of a 'performance' and not a marketing ploy. In another incident Etcetera was challenged by a security guard on the steps of the Town Hall in Sydney; an interruption that turned into an interesting and unexpected 'performance'. As one member of Etcetera negotiated with the security guard, others simply stood on the steps and continued to 'perform' minimal everyday movements such as looking at watches, straightening ties, picking up or putting down briefcases. The performer 'negotiating' stalled for long enough to allow the others to create sufficient interest and intrigue for the audience. When it was finally agreed *not* to perform all could leave satisfied.

Arguably, and as noted previously outdoor performance is no longer seen as something outside the ordinary. During the intervening years in Australia there has been an increasing number of Festivals and an emphasis on including outdoor entertainment as a major component of their programming. The outdoor entertainment is often aimed at families and has the added advantage in many cases of being free of charge; the idea is bringing the theatre to the people. Year round places such as Circular Quay in Sydney, where tourists are likely to gather also attract outdoor performers (they are still required to have licences).

Perhaps the development and acceptance of outdoor performance might also be understood internationally in the current trend of 'flash mobs.' These primarily amateur

groups are able to plan their appearances using mobile technologies and social media. Recording and uploading onto YouTube they are able to reach out to audiences of unprecedented scale using social media platforms. While not professional performers, and appearing in much larger groupings, their very unexpectedness suggests a certain similarity to Etcetera's seemingly impromptu appearances. Performing together, and often in large numbers, their uniformity is arguably also a kind of comment on, or reaction to conformity.

A contemporary company whose work may, in some ways be understood as comparable with Etcetera, is the popular, New York based Blue Man Group.<sup>viii</sup> Although their performances are highly exuberant and they play to large crowds as opposed to Etcetera who play to smaller audiences and are more low-key, The Blue Man Group, also uses uniformity of appearance and the premise of the outsider, as well as experimental music, multimedia and humour, to create their avant-garde performances.

With no spoken language, Blue Man Group is perfect for people of all ages, languages, and cultures. ...Blue Man Group's show is an intensely exciting and wildly outrageous experience. Blue Man Group cannot be explained; it can only be experienced. (www.bluman.com. n.d.)

Today it's also possible to view the extraordinary and highly synchronised feats undertaken by the military, or massed events such as North Korea's nationalist displays, or even the precision walking competitions performed by the Japanese, as shown in YouTube video clips,<sup>ix</sup> which use the uniformity of the group to great effect. They extend walking into intricate military-like marching patterns with highly skilled coordination. Without access to any of these examples, and of course working on a much smaller scale, Etcetera frequently used marching patterns in both outdoor street

and indoor theatre presentations in order to play with ideas of conformity and mindless adherence to convention. Perhaps Etcetera was also tapping into the ‘sense of pervasive well-being’ that William McNeill describes in his book, *Keeping together in time: dance and drill in Human history* (1995, p. 2). With reference to his own experience of military drill McNeill notes that ‘something visceral was at work’ and refers to ‘a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual’ (p. 2). Like McNeill, Etcetera found that ‘marching became an end in itself. Moving briskly and keeping in time was enough to make us feel good about ourselves...’ (1995, p. 2)

### **Contextual and Literature Review**

In retrospect, it is possible to identify many influences on Etcetera, but at the time there was no conscious decision to copy or emulate others. On the contrary, like many alternative companies, Etcetera desired to be different. Etcetera members sought to eschew convention by creating unique material and by having an original approach to performance and the process of creating work. Of course nothing is ‘original’ or developed in a vacuum and unconsciously Etcetera’s work absorbed the zeitgeist and reflected many influences. Consequently this essay seeks to recognise the work of artists from a range of art form backgrounds, which may be understood as providing the artistic lineage for Etcetera’s work, as much as for the new work, *The Inventorists*. It also draws on secondary sources such as theatre histories of the avant-garde, community, street and physical theatre, and to a lesser extent, some of the strategies of performance art. In many ways, this new work, *The Inventorists* may be described as hybrid. This exegesis will therefore discuss the many influences drawn from music, dance, circus (clowning) silent film and the visual arts.

Having come from a background in both classical and contemporary dance,<sup>x</sup> an important personal influence is American choreographer Marilyn Wood, who began her dance career in the early 1950s with modernist dance legends such as Alwin Nikolais,<sup>xi</sup> whom she danced with from 1952 – 57 and later Merce Cunningham<sup>xii</sup> from 1958 - 62. Avant-garde composer and polymath, John Cage (1912 – 1992) and visual artist, Robert Rauschenberg (1925 – 2008) also influenced Wood as they all worked with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company at the same time (1958 – 62). Consequently it is not surprising that when Wood later started her own company, The Celebrations Group in 1968 she boldly embarked on a very different approach to dance and performance herself. She started by creating environmental works for the urban landscape. Her experimental dance installation work for the Seagram Building and Plaza in New York in 1972 was a significant event as one of the earliest works to draw attention to a particular site in the city.<sup>xiii</sup>

Coming to Adelaide for the 1976 Adelaide Festival, Wood was engaged to apply her unique approach to bring the festival to the people and to create an element of surprise by presenting performances in unusual places. Such site-specific or environmental performances may be understood as referring to:

... an artist's intervention in a specific locale, creating a work that is integrated with its surroundings and that explores its relationship to the topography of its locale, whether indoors or out, urban, desert, marine, or otherwise.

([www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org) n.d.)

When I was introduced to Marilyn Wood and selected along with several others<sup>xiv</sup> to perform in her Celebrations Group for the 1976 Adelaide Festival, site specific

performance was, for me, a radical departure from the cloistered world of The Australian Ballet. Instead of rehearsing the repertoire in studios and theatres, time was spent outdoors ‘scoring’ several sites that had been selected for performances. By ‘scoring the site’ Wood meant recording as much as possible about the site, both objectively, the practical details as well as subjectively, personal impressions and feelings about the site. Cheryl Stock, one of the performers of the Celebrations Group refers to this process in *Moving sites: investigating site-specific dance performance*:

Arguably the most important and useful legacy of working closely with Marilyn Wood was a thorough preparation for engaging with site and audience in public spaces; a process called ‘Scoring the Site’ (Stock, 2015, p. 389).

Wood gave very specific instructions in her “*Experiencing The Site*” Score (1976) ‘Go alone. If you meet anyone you know, communicate non-verbally only’, and ‘...be sensitive and responsive to any impressions...’ (1976). From Wood’s perspective we were ‘on a data-collecting mission’ (1976) collecting information about the spatial qualities of the area, the energy level, the flow of movement, the sound environment to the more specific behaviour and interaction between people and finally to practical considerations such as entrances and exits. (See appendix 3. “*Experiencing the Site*” Score). It soon became apparent that this was an incredibly important aspect of the development process, both in its appreciation and range of detail, as well as the bigger picture. Being introduced to this process influenced not only other site-specific work, but also my future work, as a performer, choreographer and director.

While a considerable amount of time was spent outdoors observing sites, we also worked in the more conventional studio space in preparing for the Festival performances. These rehearsals were organic and improvisational, exploratory and

open-ended in nature, anything but the setting of steps and ‘traditional’ choreography of the dance rehearsals I had previously experienced. Rehearsals included duets: ‘do movements together, impossible to do alone’ (*Movement Improvisation Scores*, 1976) and group improvisations, ‘moving sculptures’ and ‘move very briskly close in without touching’ (1976). While the focus was not on retaining a sequence of steps to be repeated, the constant practice of working this way meant that when it came to performance there was a ‘vocabulary’ of movement phrases to draw from.

Part of the challenge of working outdoors lies often in not being able to rehearse in the location beforehand. In the theatre, dedicated time is spent in technical and dress rehearsals so that when the audience arrives performers are well prepared. The experience of performing outdoors was liberating in its challenges and unpredictability; being in different spaces/environments gave the experience an immediacy that required the performers to develop the ability to adapt according to circumstances. The protection of the proscenium arch gave way to ‘theatre’ in the public domain. The relationship with the ‘audience’ became far more interactive and one that felt much more like a shared experience.

Marilyn Wood’s influence led directly to the formation of Community Celebrations later that year (in mid 1976), a company that included dancer/performers, Cheryl Stock<sup>xv</sup> and Tony Strachan<sup>xvi</sup> and even later, in 1983 to the formation of Etcetera, another company that would also perform outdoors seeking ‘to give people a different sense of their environment’ (Wedmeyer, 1972). As Anthony Steel, director of the 1976 Adelaide Festival noted in his book, *Painful in Daily Doses*:

Marilyn's work during that festival made an enormous impression on the Australians who were part of her team and had a very real influence on the development of such 'happenings' in this country. Marilyn's visit helped to create a context that has enabled great community events to flourish in Australia. (2009, p. 145).

While greatly inspired by Wood and her explorations of outdoor performance, other choreographers also influenced my work with Etcetera. For instance, I often referenced Hollywood film director and choreographer Busby Berkeley (1895 – 1976) who used his World War I experience of military parades to create elaborate, kaleidoscopic patterns in many of the extravagant musical films of the 1930/40s. 'Marching' routines and simple grid like patterns appeared in many Etcetera performances both in theatres and outdoors. As noted previously they were effective because they were relatively easy for the non-dancers in the company to master and the patterns they created gave immediate impact. These marching routines were also able to be easily adapted in performance to either travel or to be done on the spot or a combination of both. Some of the routines included simple vaudevillian sight gags, which were relatively easy to incorporate in the overall pattern. I was also influenced, though unaware of it at the time, by a new minimalist approach to choreography using everyday movements and gestures. New York based dancer/choreographer Lucinda Childs (b1940)<sup>xvii</sup> and members of the Judson Dance Theatre she helped found in 1963, exemplify this approach: 'the group promoted the beauty of ordinary motions and gestures; pedestrian as positive.' (Paull, 2012) The minimal gestures of the Etcetera Business Men, such as adjusting one's hat, or straightening a tie, putting down or picking up a briefcase, exchanging business cards – in a sequence and to a defined rhythm - were fundamental to the choreography I created.

In 1983 when Etcetera was established, terms such as: ‘Theatre of Mixed Means’ as defined by Richard Kostelanetz; ‘Theatre of Image’ introduced by American critic, Bonnie Maranca; ‘Postdramatic Theatre’ as theorised by German scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann; and the even more generic term, ‘physical theatre’ described by Heddon and Milling as work that ‘melds dance, mime, visual arts, circus and drama together...’ (2006, p. 157), were all unknown to Etcetera members, and yet these are all terms that have some relevance to the type of work being developed by the company at that time. This is particularly because the work proposed a new way of engaging with theatre and performance, and therefore a new language with which to communicate to its audience. As Richard Kostelanetz explains in *The Theatre of Mixed Means*:

...in drawing upon several kinds of communication, a mixed-means piece speaks in several languages at once, insisting that its audience be as artistically polylingual as its creator. A realized event should exemplify Richard Southern’s dictum: “All good theatre should be comprehensible to a deaf man.” (1968, p. 8)

The history of experimental and alternative theatre not only provides a rich background and a context for the work of Etcetera it also allows me to contextualise *The Inventorists* created in 2015. With members of the group having different backgrounds and creating collaboratively, Etcetera’s hybrid works may not only be understood as part of the ‘new theatre’ described by Richard Kostelanetz, but in terms of Bonnie Maranca’s ‘Theatre of Images’, which she describes as one that, ‘...never became a literary theatre, but one dominated by images – visual and aural’ (1984, p. 77). In 1984 Etcetera was already working, albeit intuitively, on a ‘theatre of images’ consciously rejecting the use of text in performance.



In an attempt to define the work of Etcetera 'Physical Theatre' is another term that has been used by others to describe Etcetera's work. However, it became such a popular term and seemed to apply to so many different companies doing a wide range of work that was perhaps more grounded in physical training regimes drawn from circus or corporeal mime for instance, that for us it did not seem to be an appropriate description.

Broadly speaking there are four main strands to the current work in physical theatre or performance: that which lies closest to dance...that which draws its influence from popular arts such as clowning, street entertainment, some aspects of mime and circus...that which draws inspiration from traditional theatre or traditional mime, and focuses predominantly on narrative and storytelling...and that which develops a crossover between live art and physical performance...

(Heddon & Milling, 2006, p. 162).

In *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader* (2007), editors Keefe and Murray suggest that, 'Perhaps the moment of physical theatre has passed...' however they go on to note that 'it remains present and – at times – clamorous both in the language of performance and in a variety of diverse contemporary theatre practices' (2007, p. 2).

Articulating and defining the work undertaken by Etcetera continues to present something of a dilemma. However, this research project has made it clear to me that attempts to define 'new' forms of theatre date back until at least 1968 and continue to this day. One way of describing Etcetera has been, and continues to be as a 'visual' theatre company and at times it has seemed closer to performance art than to theatre, or at least to sit somewhere between the two.

RoseLee Goldberg's seminal *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the present* (1979), describes the evolution of 'body as art' and its increasing popularity in the performance art of the seventies. Etcetera, by creating tableaux in everyday environments utilised their bodies and the uniformity of their appearance to make 'art' in public spaces. Goldberg also refers to English conceptual artists Gilbert and George who '...personified the idea of art; they themselves became art...' (1979, p. 108) Etcetera, primarily a visual theatre company and strongly influenced by conceptual art, often identified more with strategies of performance art than with theatre. Particularly in the early days when much of the work was site-specific, and more like installations, there was a desire to... 'become art'. The Etcetera Business Men were similar in appearance to some of Gilbert and George's works, where both are attired in bland, mundane suits, subversively celebrating the ordinary and everyday. (See figure 7) Etcetera was also strongly influenced by the Surrealist movement, by artists such as Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) and in particular, Rene Magritte (1898 – 1967) whose faceless, bowler-hatted gentlemen greatly inspired the development of Etcetera's Business Men characters. Etcetera appreciated not only the art works but also the aesthetic approach; the Surrealists were interested in moving away from conventional representation in art and placing more emphasis on ideas. Etcetera deliberately adopted the elements of chance and play championed by the Surrealists when devising new work. As the preface to Ruth Brandon's *Surreal Lives* explains, 'Surrealism had given us a new way of looking at the world' (1999, p.5).

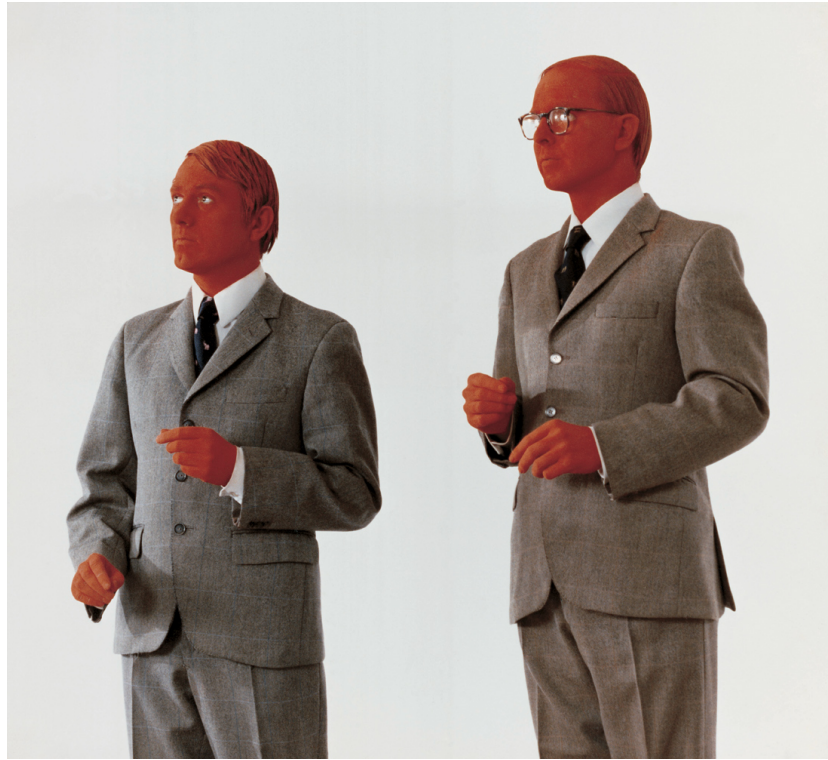


Figure 7. Gilbert and George from *The Red Sculpture Album*, 1975.

From the outset music played a big part in Etcetera's performances. Members of the company played live in performances as well as composed and sourced music to accompany acts in the shows. Company member, Wayne Freer<sup>xviii</sup> arranged several key Etcetera tunes using brass instrumentation, with tuba, trombone and saxophones played live in performance by the company members. Scottish-born, New York based musician/composer David Byrne, (b.1952) was an important influence on Etcetera's music 'style', particularly his syncopated brass instrumentation for *The Kneeplays* composed for Robert Wilson's *the CIVIL WarS* in 1985. Byrne's collaboration with Brian Eno produced the album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* in 1981, another source of music that influenced Etcetera but quite different to *The Kneeplays*. The eclectic range of Byrne's music styles, the catchy rhythms and strong bass lines; the combination of simple yet profound and often humorous lyrics all made his music appealing.<sup>xix</sup>

Not only was David Byrne's music an influence on Etcetera, his early work with *Talking Heads*, the band he fronted as lead singer from 1975 to 1991 and particularly the band's video clips were inspiring. The visual content was often surreal and absurd. The use of costume, like the 'big suit' worn by Byrne for the song "Girlfriend is Better" for the 1984 documentary film of the concert *Stop Making Sense* was highly original and theatrical. In the 1986 movie *True Stories*, which Byrne wrote, directed and starred in, his deadpan delivery demonstrates further his comedic style.

A very significant and important musical contributor was Australian classical composer, musician and Etcetera founding member, Ian Farr (1941 - 2006). His music, often composed specifically for particular acts, provided a poignant lyricism that contrasted well with the rhythmic brass of Freer's compositions. American performance artist and

musician composer Laurie Anderson's (b.1947) haunting *Big Science* (1982) her *Mister Heartbreak* (1984) and English musician composer Brian Eno's (b.1948) ambient *Music for Airports* (1978), provided sampling for soundtracks that were particularly appropriate for illusions such as black theatre where objects appear to float in space. At any given time Etcetera had at least two or three professional musicians in the line up. The rest of the group learnt to play proficiently enough for music segments to be a major part of performances, even on the street where the group performed *Briefcase Percussion*.

As noted previously, the Adelaide Festival of the Arts was a significant influence on members of Etcetera introducing them to cutting-edge, international theatre. In the 1978 Adelaide Festival, Polish theatre director Tadeus Kantor (1915 – 1990) and his company Cricot 2 presented *The Dead Class*. In this production it was not necessary to understand Polish, used minimally throughout the work. The physical language of Kantor's theatre was visceral and made eloquent through the embodiment of the performers. As Hans-Thies Lehmann has noted, what is compelling is Kantor's 'refusal of a dramatic representation...in favour of a pictural poetry of the stage.' He goes on to explain how, '...the dramatic disappears in favour of *moving images* through repetitive rhythms, tableau-like arrangements and a certain de-realization of the figures...' (2006, p.72) This was highly influential to Etcetera at the time.

In contrast, the internationally renowned English theatre director, Peter Brook's (b.1925) *Conference of the Birds* in the 1980 Festival presented by Brook's company, the *International Centre for Theatre Research* was presented in a huge stone quarry in Tea Tree Gully outside the city, a particularly impressive but also isolated location. As

Wendy Blaxland points out:

When a director goes further and insists, as Peter Brook does, that the performance space must be in harmony with the spirit of the performance itself and performs *Conference of the Birds* in a deserted quarry at the Adelaide Festival, he is seen by many as eccentric or perverse...(he) removes the boundaries between the actors and the audience to gain greater intimacy... (1984, p. 43).

This production emphasised the importance of a site chosen specifically for the performance. It showed how powerful large-scale outdoor performance could be, while still maintaining an immediacy and an empathy with the human qualities of the performers.

The work of French theatre artist Philippe Genty (b.1938) in performances such as *Derives* (1989), which combined puppetry with live performers in surreal, dreamlike scenarios inspired the expansion and further exploration of puppetry already used as part of Etcetera's eclectic toolkit.<sup>xx</sup> British company *Theatre de Complicité* (now simply *Complicité*) whose work was group devised and highly symbolic, using techniques such as figuration (where performers transform to become objects) and the animation of props was also inspiring for members of Etcetera. Works such as *Street of Crocodiles* (1992) and *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* (1994) had a particularly strong resonance with Etcetera members.

These companies: Tadeus Kantor's Cricot 2, Peter Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research, Compagnie Philippe Genty and Complicité, all presented material that was distant from conventional drama, using visual imagery and physicality as the foundation of their performance works. Etcetera may be understood as participating in

what in retrospect may be seen as an international movement seeking to create a ‘new’ theatre that would engage with diverse audiences in alternative sites.

Clowning was introduced to Etcetera by ensemble member Russell Garbutt who was influenced by the great clowns of the silent movies of the early twentieth century, particularly Charlie Chaplin (1889 – 1977) and Buster Keaton (1895 – 1966) with their ability to physically convey the range of human emotion. French filmmaker Jacques Tati (1907 – 1982) was another clown who, while his films were produced in the ‘talkie’ era, nevertheless chose to use a silent physical language. Tati developed the character of the inept *Monsieur Hulot* who appeared in the successful films, *Mon Oncle* (1953) and *Monsieur Hulot’s Holiday* (1958). Although not as extreme in physicality as Tati, the qualities of innocence and naivety exemplified by *Monsieur Hulot*, were adopted by the early Etcetera characters, outsiders trying very hard to fit into society. In the film *Playtime* (1967) Tati’s *Monsieur Hulot* finds himself trapped in a ‘modern world’. The Etcetera Business Men, who first appeared in 1986, embodied this modern world, albeit not quite from the contemporary world (see figure 8). Instead they referenced the businessmen of the 1950s, or even, in their monochrome suits, the film noir of the 1940s. Their minimal and subtle characterisation, often saw them simply standing still, as the rest of the world moved by, directly referencing Tati’s observation, particularly in *Playtime* (1967) that perhaps ‘progress’ is not always for the best. Tati’s films have barely any dialogue and no logical storyline, but are experienced visually, inviting the viewer to understand the world differently.

The combination of Tati’s physical humour, his skill as a mime, his way of creating a visual aesthetic and his view of the world were all things the Etcetera performers and

creators aspired to. In an article on Etcetera in *The Eastern Herald* Pamela Payne (1992) wrote:

Their last trip out of the country was to the 1991 Edinburgh Festival Fringe where, to great acclaim, they did a month's season at The Assembly Rooms. "They create a kaleidoscope of visual imagery which Jacques Tati or Charlie Chaplin would be proud to have owned," wrote the *Daily Mail's* theatre critic (1992).



Figure 8. The Business Men, Etcetera, Melbourne Festival 1991, left to right: Glenn Rafferty, Wayne Freer, Julia Cotton, Carlos Russell and Russell Garbutt; photographer Arthur Lemon.

In the 1980s and 90s Etcetera performed in theatres and on the street, at festivals in Australia and internationally as well as in cabaret, on television and for special events (see appendix 2 for select Etcetera biography). This exegesis has so far presented the



background and influences that contributed to the development of the company and has also considered factors in the evolution of new forms of theatre and theatre making both in Australia and overseas. The next section of this paper covers the current work of the Etcetera Duo and the making of a new performance piece *The Inventorists*. It reflects on and compares the process that was used in the early days of Etcetera with the way Russell Garbutt and I, as the Etcetera Duo develop material today.

In 2010, after many years of not performing I was surprised at how effortless it felt to be working with Russell Garbutt again. The creative process and performing in the Etcetera 'style' was comfortable in its familiarity. Revisiting Etcetera's work and seeing how it had evolved on one level but also how it had remained timeless, gave rise to an interest in examining the process by which we create our work. The following section, *The Inventorists: an inventory of lives through objects* seeks to analyse that process, to compare it with our earlier work with Etcetera and to ascertain whether this process and the resulting material is relevant today.

### ***The Inventorists: an inventory of lives through objects***

The idea for this project emerged from out of a series of performances titled *New, Next, Now* (see figure 9) commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) as part of its public program to accompany the gift of a significant collection of modernist and contemporary art, given to the museum by the famous collector and art philanthropist, John Kaldor.<sup>xxi</sup> In a short video on the Gallery's website, coordinator of Public Programs, Victoria Collings explains why she engages Etcetera to perform at AGNSW:

...they really take on board the curatorial rationale of the artworks in the Gallery and the

way exhibitions are put together...they bring works of art to life...and make them accessible to our audience (AGNSW 2012).

Presented in 2011 and 2012 *New, Next, Now* referenced several art works in the Kaldor exhibition. While inspired by the range of works in the exhibition, we had to focus on just a few key works to reference in the performance. These included Christo's *Two Wrapped Trees* (1969), Ugo Rondinone's *clockwork for oracles* (2011), and Sol LeWitt's *Wall drawing #1091: arcs, circles, bands (room)* (2003). While these works were featured in the performance, it was American artist Robert Rauschenberg's work *31100/ new born/ Indian river/ planters/ snow* (1971) that gave *New, Next, Now* its theme. This work is made up of boxes opened, flattened and mounted on the wall. The motif of boxes, containing objects that referred to the art works within the collection was a key starting point for the performance.



Figure 9. Etcetera Duo in *New, Next, Now* at the Art Gallery of NSW 2011; photographer Andrea Zubani.

As noted at the outset of this research paper, the image of a store-room filled with boxes is a particularly resonant one for this research project, which continues with the motif of boxes as presented in *New, Next, Now*. For *The Inventorists*, however, instead of artworks the boxes contain everyday objects, which have emotional significance for the lives of the ‘characters’.

*The Inventorists* is set in an imaginary derelict warehouse or storage space where two oddly anonymous, grey dust-coated characters are counting and cataloguing boxes. They appear to have been given the task of making an inventory of the boxes and their contents, but what seems simple and straightforward to begin with soon turns into something altogether different. (See figure 10)



Figure 10. *The Inventorists* (2015), performers: Russell Garbutt and Julia Cotton; photographer Kylie McKendry.

These boxes have a uniformity and ordinariness to them, but they also have the potential to produce anything. They promise surprise, whether that surprise, like Pandora's box contains the evils of the world, something more mundane like winter woollies, or conversely, the joyfulness of children's presents. From cataloguing the boxes to checking what is inside them, the two characters in *The Inventorists* are drawn into the world of the articles they find and are transported by the stories they evoke. The intention was to suggest that they are going through someone else's long-accumulated belongings, but to make it apparent through the development of the show, that they are instead, making an inventory of their own lives.

One of our aims in setting *The Inventorists* in a storage space or warehouse was to create an atmosphere that combined feelings of familiarity and nostalgia with something deeper and perhaps darker. In *The Inventorists* we also wanted to make a gentle comment about our consumer society in which things are constantly replaced, much is thrown away, but many things are kept and stored even if they no longer serve any practical purpose. The proliferation of consumer goods has seen our attitudes changing towards objects and our relationship with them. On the one hand much is now disposable; technology for example, which is quickly outdated. On the other hand, the obsessive-compulsive disorder of hoarding sees the sufferer unable to throw anything away.

We were also interested in exploring how our attachment to objects is related to memory: the desire to keep those mementos that hold the promise of reminiscence, as well as the ability of an object to transport us to a particular place, time or age in our lives. It is not only personal objects that we collect, but also those of our ancestors,

those family heirlooms that carry history and another generation of memories with them. These concerns provide the background from which *The Inventorists* explores the question of whether it is possible to reinvent or ascertain a life story through objects.

The work is designed to be performed in different contexts and venues: from an independent small theatre, a warehouse or studio; even as a site-specific work in a storage space or an attic. The use of very simple sets and costumes and a low-tech aesthetic may be understood as extending the qualities that have always distinguished Etcetera's work. In *The Inventorists* this minimalist approach is retained with simple costumes of grey dustcoats, the characters continue Etcetera's tradition of the bland, faceless everyman originally inspired by the work of Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte and his bowler-hatted gentlemen or Jacques Tati's Monsieur Hulot. These characters could be seen as an extension of the gallery attendants we represent in our performances at AGNSW as well as the Business Men Etcetera presented in their performances in the 90s, emblematic of bureaucracy. What is different about *The Inventorists*, is that the characters are much closer to us as people, and this strongly informed the content of the show. The set, primarily constructed from packing boxes, seeks to suggest a recognisable environment that is somehow unsettling. More practically, the boxes help with the illusions by creating a controlled environment from which things may appear or disappear. The lighting and sound is designed to create an atmosphere that is intended to distort the audience's sense of time, subtly suggesting that the characters are trapped in a kind of limbo.

## The Process

Russell and I both come from specific discipline backgrounds, and our long-term artistic relationship has led to a strong understanding and respect for each other's work. Russell's training includes a Diploma of Creative Arts from the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education and he is a self-taught magician. My early training and practice in ballet meant long hours of rehearsal and repetition to improve technique. Similarly Russell's background as a magician/illusionist required many hours of practice. The sleight of hand and ability to 'misdirect' the audience's attention requires great attention to detail, and a very specific sequence of movements. In the early days our approach to making work was quite distinct, I would choreograph routines and Russell would focus on how to achieve an illusion. Devising work collectively in the early days of Etcetera meant that there were many members informing the creative process, each with their own speciality. Our solution was to take turns to 'direct' different segments. Since we started working together again in 2010, the approach Russell and I have taken has become more organic, having worked together for so long it's as if we're on the same wavelength and know instinctively what the other will do. Although we still have our particular areas, in the rehearsal process these areas now seem to overlap. Nevertheless, while this process may have evolved over the years, this paper argues that it is still fundamentally the same process that we developed together in the eighties. Examining this creative process and comparing what we did thirty years ago to what we do now has formed the basis of this research paper. In seeking to assess the relevance of the strategies we initiated then and continue to use, and guided by the positive audience response to *The Inventorists*, this paper argues that these strategies remain effective and productive.

The process of creating a new work for Etcetera has three stages. The first stage is the creative development period, which consists of brainstorming, improvisation and trial and error. Next comes the rehearsal process where decisions are made and the content and a structure for the work are developed. Also alongside rehearsal is the making of the props, puppets and illusions that will feature in the show. The final stage is detailing, consolidating and adding whatever technical aspects might be required for performance.

As previously, our process begins with discussion and the generation of ideas where we act as a sounding board for each other. At times these meetings can be quite specific and orderly, where lists and plans are made, but the free association of ideas and imaginative responses to these ideas are the key to developing a new show. As Edward de Bono maintains ‘possibility is the key to creativity’ (2007, p.8). Each of us has ideas that we want to explore, often ideas that relate either to the theme of the show or props/images that we might use in the show. To start with we are open to many possibilities, however, as the process evolves there is a natural attrition and gradually we find the ideas that survive the process are either the most suitable or simply the most practical. The ideas that don’t make it may well be revisited later and used in a subsequent show. An example in the development of *The Inventorists* is the opening sequence, which went through a number of iterations. Initially we experimented with torches that illuminated the boxes as, in our warehouse characters, we entered the dark and slightly ominous space, almost like explorers venturing into unknown territory. Ultimately, we decided that this was unnecessarily elaborate, and made a much more straightforward entrance.

## Improvisation

In examining Etcetera's creative process, one area of the research that was of particular interest was how we generate new material through improvisation. The theme of the show dictates the ideas we will start to work with, which in the case of *The Inventorists*, was the idea of storage and boxes in which to store things. Improvisation also involves playing with the potential props or objects, with *The Inventorists* this not only included the boxes and their possible contents, but also the packing materials. Our basic principle of improvisation is to accept every offer, being prepared to follow through while acknowledging that what may evolve may well be absurd, surreal or simply not make sense. As the master of improvisation, Keith Johnstone<sup>xxii</sup> says, 'Good improvisers seem telepathic...because they accept all offers made – which is something no 'normal' person would do' (1982, p. 99). Keeping an open mind to any possibility is crucial and picking up on whatever happens allows for discoveries that could not be made any other way. 'The improviser has to understand that his first skill lies in releasing his partner's imagination' (1982, p. 93). There is an aspect of letting go of logic and allowing the unconscious part of the brain to operate which is liberating, following through instinctively, not trying to work out 'why' but allowing the work to develop organically. Having worked together for many years Russell and I have come to trust our intuitive process and have developed a strong instinct for not only what will work but also what won't. We don't waste too much time persevering with something that doesn't 'feel right'. The one difficulty in working this way is the ability to repeat and reproduce 'successful' actions or movement phrases, which is why we film what we do. We can then select bits that work and edit and refine others. This is particularly important because we don't work with a director, and therefore don't have an 'outside eye'. The camera allows us to play back and to 'direct' ourselves. In *The Inventorists* we



improvised most of the scenes to start with. For instance, we worked with large plastic dropcloths, which we used in a strangely lyrical fashion to evoke an otherworldly atmosphere and to suggest ghostly apparitions. The mood of the scene was very much determined by the material properties of the plastic, and its effectiveness when floating in the dark resulted in a simple but highly evocative sequence. Later in the process, in what we called the ‘Discard’ scene, we simply filled a couple of boxes with found objects and clothes filming our improvisations, playing with the objects. Watching back we could see what had potential, and gradually we refined the scene to the few articles that maintained a visual interest.

Once the improvisational process has generated sufficient ideas and material, we then begin the ‘rehearsal’ process by separating these ideas into a series of discrete acts. We then work on each of these scenes independently, continuing to improvise and film different versions. How the scenes will work together and in what order they will be presented comes later. While a certain amount of time is spent rehearsing together and working out ideas on the floor, a considerable amount of time is also spent in making props, puppets and illusions for each show. Many of the illusions require hours of painstaking preparation, which may last only a matter of seconds in performance. Rehearsal and prop-making happen concurrently as one aspect inevitably informs the other.

Once we have worked on each scene or act we then start to work out the possible order or sequence of the acts. We continue to move scenes around, experimenting with different combinations. The different types of acts – for example comic routines, puppetry or illusions can sometimes dictate the order in which they are presented. There

are practical considerations but the natural dynamic flow is also important. Heddon and Milling refer to the process of the People Show,<sup>xxiii</sup> England's longest running experimental theatre company:

The dramaturgy of the performances is dictated by pacing and by images...Structural decisions, then, are often pragmatic: slow sections are contrasted with chaotic sections: loud with quiet...the expected with surprise, or the known with mystery (2006, p. 79).

This is very similar to our approach and decisions on the order of sections are made on dynamics rather than on plot or a literal interpretation. Filming also helps to decide the order of the 'acts', and to determine the length of both individual scenes, and the show as a whole. Once the order of scenes has been defined, the transitions between them are rehearsed. The transitions are as important as the scenes themselves in moving the performance along and keeping the audience engaged, and quite a bit of time is spent on making them smooth, and ensuring a sense of continuity and flow.

### Choreography

The role of choreography in this process is less to do with the setting of dance sequences and more to do with the setting of movement patterns. As a structuring device, choreography takes in the big picture, considering the overall flow of the production, while simultaneously looking at the moment-to-moment detail of specific actions in each sequence. Most of the choreographic process is in this detail, both in the transitions between scenes and within the scenes themselves. However, depending on the scene, particularly those involving illusions, which are inherently unpredictable, it is not possible to set every moment. Some scenes need flexibility in both movement and timing. The soundtrack, which is integrally linked to the choreography, needs to reflect

this and allow for the variable timing of such scenes. Once we have a good idea of the sequence, the ‘choreography’ of transitions, exits and entrances becomes the focus, so that we can delineate a map of the pathways through the show. More often than not, this ‘choreography’ is a process of confirming what we have already come up with intuitively through improvisation. By setting the movements and being precise, the body memory that results gives us, and the work, clarity.

The pointe shoes sequence in *The Inventorists* was choreographed like a dance and set to music. It began as a fairly generalised, nostalgic scene, but this seemed too sentimental, so drawing on images from the film, *The Red Shoes* (1948), starring Moira Shearer and choreographed by Robert Helpmann, I made the movements more specific and comical. Using basic balletic imagery, I incorporated the shoes ‘running away’ with my body having to catch up with them. A different approach was used in the newspaper puppet scene in which the choreography is more about the sequence of actions. It begins with Russell and I opening a box and discovering a newspaper creature - the puppet. The focus quickly shifts to the surprisingly animate puppet as he yawns, stretches and looks around him. From that point, his movements are very precisely set, so that while the timing may vary slightly nothing else changes.

Having structured the sequence of scenes, we tend to run everything to create a rough draft or overall sketch of the work. Again, this helps us arrive at the appropriate order of the acts depending on the flow and the theatrical ‘sense’ of the piece. In the later stages of rehearsal we either do a complete run through, or what we refer to as a ‘walk/talk through’ where we don’t do the illusions or use the props but simply go through the blocking paying particular attention to transitions and entrances and exits. On a very

practical level this is the most efficient way to work, given the amount of time it takes to set and reset the props and illusions.

### Materials and Props

For *The Inventorists* creating the wall of boxes was a major consideration, not only in evoking a storage space, but also in lending an almost claustrophobic feeling to the space. The apparently random aesthetic of the boxes was crafted to suggest timelessness. Puppetry and object theatre are integral to our performances. For *The Inventorists*, we animated objects that came out of the boxes, including toys, crockery, scarves, a photograph, and even a pair of pointe shoes. One of the apparently most affecting sequences involves a shredded paper puppet discovered in one of the boxes, and shows how endowing an inanimate object with ‘human’ qualities, can have an emotional effect on audiences. We also explored the possibilities in the packing materials themselves, such as plastic and newspaper (see figure 11). By animating these materials, we hoped to discover their potential to become something ‘other’. Some objects, like the soft toys are obvious and work on an immediate emotional level, while others like the floating plastic, are more ephemeral and evocative. Generally we seek to take ordinary objects and materials and find ways of utilising them that allow the audience to see them differently. Newspaper for instance, is used in several ways, from the predictable wrapping of objects to pages being juggled, then, enveloping Russell and even sticking to his face like a newspaper mask. Most effectively, however, was the use of shredded newspaper to create a convincingly animate puppet. In each of these sequences the paper is used differently, allowing it to take on fresh qualities with each new iteration. Newspaper is a material of apparently endless possibility, with which we continue to find new ways to work, and have done since the early days of Etcetera.

While many companies are keen to embrace new technology, our approach remains rooted in the exploration of the properties and potential of everyday materials and objects.



Figure 11. *The Inventorists*, 2015, animating newspaper; photographer Kylie McKendry.

### Recycling

In generating material for a new show we often draw on past work, and this project was no exception. While *The Inventorists* gave us the opportunity to explore and invest in new ideas, the impetus behind the research question, which asks whether performance strategies initially developed in the nineteen eighties might still be relevant today, meant that there was a conscious decision to reference Etcetera's past work. Consequently, we drew on material from many years ago, as for instance in the 'Newspaper Mask', which first appeared in 1991, in the stage show, *Etcetera Incorporated*, as well as in outdoor

performances of the Etcetera Business Men. ‘The Moth’ and the ‘Dancing Cane’ scenes are both illusions that first appeared in the 1984 stage show, *L’Age Duck*. ‘The Moth’ was in a dream sequence with larger than life props including a mug, a hot water bottle, a rubber duck and a candle, to which the moth was drawn, and predictably burst into flames. For *The Inventorists*, the Moth is in a box and is only revealed briefly before it too is ignited in a flash. Russell’s Dancing Cane routine was originally performed to a different soundtrack and with a more upbeat mood. For *The Inventorists* we introduced a narrative connection, which saw him first finding an old poster of his early performance, establishing the historical – possibly nostalgic - reference. Consequently the routine is performed with a very different intention to the original, being staged almost as a reminiscence of the earlier version.

We also drew on more recent material; animating plastic and the shredded paper puppet both appeared in the AGNSW show, *New, Next, Now* in 2011 and 2012. Existing material allows us a starting point for improvisation. The key elements here are adapting and contextualising the material, so that it sits comfortably within the new framework. Also having existing material allows us to work keeping that in mind. For instance before we even started rehearsal we decided that Russell and the Dancing Cane would be the final sequence of the show. Recycling material has become simply another part of our process and even though the acts may seemingly be repeated they are never the same, taking on different qualities with each re-invention. Audience responses to these scenes suggest that the older material remains relevant to audiences today.

## The Space

Finding the appropriate space to present *The Inventorists* was an important consideration. We didn’t want a conventional theatre venue, but we did want to explore

theatrical elements such as lighting. When ReadyMade Works,<sup>xxiv</sup> a dance studio in Ultimo, Sydney was made available for our creative development phase, and then offered for the performance itself, we were happy to accept. It felt appropriate for the mood of the work. Housed in an old building, it had the advantage of traditional architecture that lent a certain ambience to the work, and being a studio space it lent *The Inventorists* an atmosphere, perhaps more suggestive of an installation. While conveniently located on the edge of Sydney's CBD, the ReadyMade Works space was unfamiliar to many audience members, which we hoped would give them a sense of discovery. To find the space audience members had to go down an alley and up the stairs at the back of the building; once there, they were secluded from outside distraction. From the upstairs verandah, they could watch the sun set over the city and unwind while enjoying a pre-show drink. To create a relaxed and receptive state in our audience, we decided to keep them outside on the lovely, wide verandah prior to entering the space. It also felt appropriate that the audiences were relatively small, the intimacy adding to the sense of engagement with the piece. Consideration of the overall experience for the audience was important to us.

The studio does not have a 'black-out' facility, but taking advantage of this limitation in fact enhanced the atmosphere. The performance began at dusk so that the audience experienced the natural light coming through the windows as it began to fade and change, which we hoped would add to the feeling of entering another world. It also suggested a dreamlike quality, a transition into a hypnagogic state, in which the sense of reality could be momentarily suspended, and the audience gently introduced into the world of the performance.

While the boxes initially defined the space as a familiar ‘storage’ facility, we wanted to evoke the sense that anything could happen there (see figure 12). As the performance progressed, the atmosphere darkened as night fell, it might have begun to seem that perhaps the characters are trapped, or even ‘residents’ endlessly cataloguing and sorting through boxes. At the end of the performance, they do not exit, but are instead enveloped by cartons, seemingly disappearing into the boxes.

## **Conclusion**

Creating *The Inventorists* and the writing of this research paper has been a closely intertwined process. It has been an opportunity to reflect on both the original and current work of Etcetera. Going through boxes and archives, looking through old programs and photographs has affirmed Etcetera’s pioneering role in the history of Australian contemporary performance and theatre from a period that is little documented. The research has also allowed me to draw connections between what was happening in Australia and internationally during the nineteen eighties, pinpointing this period as pivotal in moving away from traditional models of theatre into a ‘theatre of mixed means’. This research project began by asking whether performance strategies developed in the nineteen eighties might still be relevant today. Audience responses from both the students who saw the work in its creative development phase as well as the audience who saw the fully realised production at the ReadyMade Works studio were very positive. The feedback session at the University of Wollongong elicited lively discussion and we were particularly gratified that the undergraduate students who attended this showing were so enthusiastic about the work, reassuring us that it resonated with a contemporary audience. Their comments were insightful, and combined with others to inform the final version of the show presented for examination.



Students were particularly positive about the use of illusion, the atmosphere, the weird, strange and surprising nature of the performance and particularly the use of ordinary objects such as boxes, newspaper and plastic to create magical illusions. Consequently, this exegesis seeks to argue that Etcetera's contribution to these developments, and the strategies for devising performance, are not only still relevant today, but contribute to our burgeoning understanding of Australia's history of performance and theatre since the nineteen eighties.



Figure 12. *The Inventorists*, 2015, moving boxes; photographer Kylie McKendry

The making of *The Inventorists* was also an opportunity to evaluate the strategies used in the creative process, and to compare the current process with that of the original company. While those strategies have inevitably changed over time, the process itself

feels fundamentally the same. Not only my analysis and reflection on the generative process of devising material for *The Inventorists*, but also the warm response it received from different audiences, suggests that our processes remain relevant and effective. In combining a highly disciplined skills base with play and improvisation has proven a practical and efficient means of consolidating and refining performance ideas. Research into other companies and their working methodologies has shown that devising is now an accepted and well-documented method of creating new work.

Ultimately, while we have no current plans to revisit *The Inventorists*, elements of the work undertaken for this production will certainly inform future projects developed by Russell Garbutt and myself as the Etcetera Duo and in particular the use of recycled materials, illusion, choreography and a little bit of eccentricity. In my current role as a movement tutor I am also keen to continue to pass on to the acting students I work with the importance of the devising process. It is essential that they have a positive and productive experience of devising new work, which as this research paper also argues, lays the foundation for our future artists to be imaginative, self-reliant and confident in their ability to create their own work.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Members of Etcetera 1983 - 1998

Stewart Bennett (actor)	Ben Greaves (actor)
Mark Blackwell (musician)	Blair Greenberg (musician)
Paul Blackwell (actor)	Martin Hughes (actor)
Erin Brannigan (dancer)	Cat Lawrence (singer)
Kate Champion (dancer)	John Nelson (artist)
Julia Cotton (dancer, choreographer)	Carlos Russell (artist, musician)
Darryl Cusbert (actor)	Glenn Rafferty (actor)
Edwina Entwisle (actor)	Donato Rosella (performer, musician)
Jacqui Fairfax (actor)	Katrina Sedgwick (actor)
Ian Farr (classical musician)	Ian Spence (actor)
Lisa Ffrench (dancer)	Garry Stewart (dancer)
Ralph Franke (jazz musician)	Dan Witton (musician, physical performer)
Wayne Freer (musician)	
Russell Garbutt (illusionist)	Celia White (physical performer)

## Appendix 2. Select Etcetera biography, 1983 - 1998

- 1983      *One O’Clock Spot* – lunchtime performances at Adelaide University, outdoor performance, Fireman’s Picnic
- 1984      L’Age Duck – Theatre 62, Adelaide, outdoor performances Adelaide Festival
- 1985      Sydney Festival, Come-Out Festival Adelaide, Warana Festival Brisbane, Mattara Festival Newcastle
- 1986      Bitumen Street Theatre, Adelaide Festival, Castlemaine State Festival
- 1987      Come-Out Festival Adelaide, Warana Festival Brisbane, Mattara Festival Newcastle, Canberra Festival
- 1988      World Expo Brisbane, Sydney Festival
- 1989      *For Example* Belvoir St, Canadian tour – Quebec, Montreal and Vancouver, *Stairway to Heaven* for *The Money or the Gun* ABC TV
- 1990      *Etcetera Incorporated* Belvoir St, Singapore Festival, Adelaide Festival, Perth Festival and WA tour *Etcetera Businessmen* (street theatre) Adelaide and Perth Festivals, *The Big Gig* ABC TV
- 1991      *For Example* Adelaide Festival Centre Trust, *Etcetera Incorporated* Sydney Opera House, Come Out Festival Adelaide and country tour, *Etcetera Incorporated* Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Waterman’s Arts Centre, London *Etcetera Business Men* Cardiff, Glasgow Festivals
- 1992      *Lift Off* for Children’s Television Foundation, Creative Development with puppeteer Peter Wilson, street theatre and corporate events
- 1993      *Etcetera Business Men* Sydney Olympic Bid Monte Carlo, *In Which Case* Performance Space Sydney Festival, *Etcetera in Paper Jam* short film by Michael Bates

- 1994      *Australia Indonesia Today* street theatre, concerts, events, corporate events, Jakarta
- 1995– 98      Creative Development of new characters: Security Guards, Executives, Penguins, The Cabin Crew & Bowling Ladies
- 1997      Creative Development *Overshadowed*, director Nigel Jamieson, *Etcetera Insurance* short film, Much Ado Productions
- 1998      *Hot Toast* commission from AGNSW for 1998 Biennale



### Appendix 3. "Experiencing the Site" Score by Marilyn Wood

#### "Experiencing The Site" Score

##### Basic Procedure:

Go alone. If you meet anyone you know, communicate non-verbally only. You are on a data-collecting mission. Throughout the score, be sensitive and responsive to any impressions or fantasy aspects that happen to you. Include your feelings and intuition in your data-collecting "kit" as well.

When you begin, tune in on as many levels as possible to:-

- \* the spatial qualities of this area.
- \* the energy level here.
- \* how movement of all kinds normally functions here, velocities, patterns, directions, quiet points - all creating the CHANCE DANCE of this place.
- \* the sound environment here. At some point choose a place to sit or lie in stillness and listen.

Distinguish:

Natural sounds  
Man-made sounds  
Regular or repeating sounds  
The qualities of the NEAR sounds  
The farthest sound you can perceive  
The relationships and spaces between all these aural elements.

Once you have determined these aspects of the site, do these tasks in any order:-

- \* notice the behaviour of a specific person and/or group of people in this space.
- \* move in close but unobtrusively and follow some dialogue; ie. what do people talk about, think about here? Are people intimate or cozy in any part of this space?
- \* Where and how do they interact here; how does the space influence this?
- \* Take time to be "scored" by the space: explore all the entrances, exits, levels, structural features of this area, letting the space determine your rhythms throughout (ie. slow or brisk, etc.). Try touching, sitting, or leaning, or pulling on any object that invites this. However, the intention is to explore the properties of this site, not to draw attention to yourself. Note any special structural features here that could be easily used for theatrical effect.

- \* When you are ready, choose someone here to observe carefully in their normal functioning (way of walking, natural rhythm, activity, general styles). Then take on their body affect and do what they might do in this place. Let this fantasy continue until you feel you have really experienced this environment in a way not natural to your way.

Before you leave sit quietly and determine:-

- \* where you would start a dance in this space?
- \* what would its overall energy level be?
- \* what colours do you see the performers wearing?
- \* where would you put any simple props, if any?
- \* what sounds can you imagine adding in, live or otherwise? Where would you place these performers?
- \* how long should a dance last here, without disrupting too much the existing rhythm of the site?
- \* how or where would you end a dance here?

Please make notes on all ideas and impressions for later sharing with the group. Keep them handy to add to in the next few days as new ideas occur to you. Do not discuss your experience with any other members until a general sharing time has been scheduled.

And by all means, ENJOY YOURSELF!

## End Notes

### Introduction

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<sup>i</sup> The Etcetera Duo formed in 1997 and comprised of two original Etcetera members Russell Garbutt and Carlos Russell, who performed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW). In 2010 Julia Cotton replaced Carlos Russell and the Etcetera Duo continues to perform at AGNSW and also at The National Portrait Gallery, Canberra and Cockatoo Island

<sup>ii</sup> Although there is little written reference to Etcetera there is, on YouTube a version of *Stairway to Heaven* as performed by Etcetera Theatre Company for Andrew Denton's ABC TV satirical program, *The Money or the Gun* in 1989  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4Fsef6sTwI&index=21&list=PLB51C97ADB8ED0B89>

### Background

<sup>iii</sup> The Castanet Club, started in 1982 was made up of musicians, singers and comedians, and played RSL clubs, cabaret and music venues. In 1991 they made a feature film, *The Castanet Club*, directed by Neil Armfield before disbanding later that year.

<sup>iv</sup> The Etcetera Business Men first appeared at the Adelaide Festival in 1986. Previously, Etcetera members wore tailcoats with red bowties, but were always dressed in identical uniforms.

<sup>v</sup> Death Defying Theatre was founded in 1981 and worked as a collective or ensemble of diverse artists, based at Bondi Beach. In 1991 the company moved to Auburn in Sydney's western suburbs 'developing technically and logistically challenging, site-based performances in, with and about local communities' Ian Maxwell, *The Middle Years: Death Defying Theatre*. The company was renamed Urban Theatre Projects and later moved again further west to Casula, where 'Stories and images of contemporary life are created in collaboration with teams of artists from diverse artistic and cultural backgrounds' <http://www.urbantheatre.com.au/>

<sup>vi</sup> Legs on the Wall, established in 1984 perform work that is a combination of circus, theatre and dance. They mostly perform outdoors, particularly site-specific work and have toured internationally. Their acrobatic skills have seen them scale tall buildings but they also perform in more intimate theatre venues. 'The company has become one of Australia's busiest cultural exports, pioneering a style of performance that is particularly Australian and yet which communicates on a universal level...' Award citation, Sidney Myer Performing Arts Awards (1994) <http://www.legsonthewall.com.au/>

<sup>vii</sup> Stalker was originally formed in 1985 by David Clarkson in New Zealand, moving to Sydney in 1989 and, in the early 90s focusing on outdoor performance - a dynamic, choreographic stilt theatre. Under the shared direction of Clarkson and Rachel Swain, and seeking to redefine physical theatre, the company expanded and developed multi-art form projects, including elements of dance, installation, video and original, live music; performing large and small scale outdoor events in non-traditional locations both in Australia and abroad.  
<http://www.stalker.com.au/>

<sup>viii</sup> New York based Blue Man Group was founded in 1987 by Chris Wink, Phil Stanton and Matt Goldman. Since 1991 this award winning group, who employ a dynamic combination of music, comedy and technology have performed to great acclaim internationally, appealing to a broad range of age groups and cultural backgrounds <http://www.bluelman.com>

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<sup>ix</sup> The Japanese have been competing in synchronized team precision walking since 1966. Videos of recent competitions have been very popular through YouTube. There are many versions including <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7cQtbMtODk> which demonstrate the high levels of skill required to perform these intricate patterns.

## Contextual and Literature Review

<sup>x</sup> Julia Cotton trained at The Australian Ballet School and then danced with and choreographed for The Australian Ballet (1970 – 1975). She later joined contemporary dance company, Australian Dance Theatre (1977 – 1979).

<sup>xi</sup> American choreographer, Alwyn Nikolais (1910 – 1993) was known for his experimental dance projects and for the creation of the complete work not just the choreography. He was primarily interested in exploring abstraction, the interaction of light, sound, colour, shape, objects and moving bodies, and having the dancer's motion create linear designs and sculptural shapes without revealing his her own physical body. He introduced the use of cocoon-style stretch fabric costumes that continuously re-sculpt and extend the dancer's shape.

<sup>xii</sup> Merce Cunningham (1919 – 2009) was a leader of the American avant-garde and considered one of the most important choreographers of our time. He began his career as a dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company and continued to dance for most of his life. In 1953 he formed the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as a forum to explore his groundbreaking ideas. He expanded the frontiers not only of dance, but also of contemporary visual and performing arts.

<sup>xiii</sup> Dee Wedmeyer of the New York based *Free Lance-Star* said that Wood was aiming to give people 'a different sense of their environment' (1972, p.19) Using inspiration from the 'everyday choreography of the city' (1972, p.19) Wood stopped Park Avenue in its tracks and people certainly saw this part of the city differently.

<sup>xiv</sup> The performers of the 1976 Adelaide Celebrations group were Julia Cotton, Cheryl Stock, Wendy Wallace, Andrea Sharp, Geoffrey Cichero and Rodney Smith (dancers) Michael Pearce (artist, designer, performer) Tony Strachan (dancer, actor, writer) with Paul Adolphus and Nick Lyon (musicians, composers).

<sup>xv</sup> Cheryl Stock began her career as a dancer with Australian Dance Theatre. From 1985 until 1995 she was artistic director of contemporary dance company, Dance North. She worked on cultural exchange programs in Asia, especially in Vietnam and was a member of a number of government bodies including the Australia Council and the Arts Advisory Committee of the Queensland government. She was National President of Ausdance from 1996 to 2000. In 1999 she completed a PhD at the Queensland University of Technology and is currently associate professor in dance at that institution. Stock was the recipient of an Australian Dance Award for lifetime achievement in 2003.

<sup>xvi</sup> Tony Strachan is a writer, theatre director, choreographer and designer. He has written for Belvoir St, Playbox, Toe Truck and the ABC. He has written and directed for Australian Theatre of the Deaf, Sidetrack, Jigsaw and Death Defying Theatre. He is founder and director of the outdoor performance group Chrome, touring to international theatre festivals. He ran the outdoor components of the 1994 Melbourne and 1986 Adelaide Festivals and most recently was Artistic Director of Australian Theatre of the Deaf.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Lucinda Childs (1940 -) studied dance with Merce Cunningham and Robert Dunn and in 1962 was a founding member of the Judson Dance Theatre. Like her contemporaries, Childs sought to blur the line separating dancers from non-dancers. When she founded the Lucinda Childs Dance Company in 1973, her performances were marked by a limited series of movements. Her work *Dance*, for which she received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979, was considered a 'genuine breakthrough'. As choreographer and performer Childs collaborated with Philip Glass and Robert Wilson on *Einstein on the Beach*. She also collaborated with other artists including Sol LeWitt, architect Frank Gehry, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and composer Michael Nyman. She choreographed numerous works for various ballet companies and since 1992 has directed both classical and contemporary opera productions.

<sup>xviii</sup> Wayne Freer is a composer/musical director/multi instrumentalist who plays tuba, electric and double bass, trombone, euphonium, guitar, banjo, keyboards, bass pedals and drums. His theatre/music career began in Adelaide in the early 80's working with Alan John, Neil Armfield and Jim Sharman at Lighthouse, and with Geoffrey Rush at Magpie Theatre in Education, playing with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, with art-rock band Speedboat and performing/co-Music Directing with ETC. Co-founded The Mambologists, and played with the band and Robyn Archer in *The Conquest of Carmen Miranda*. Recorded with Jackie Orsazcky, Dave Mason, Paul Kelly, Daniel Johns, Tim Finn, Dave Brewer among others.

<sup>xix</sup> An example of Byrne's quirky lyrics can be seen in the Knee Play 4, *Social Studies*, which was written for Robert Wilson's *the CIVIL WarS* in 1985.

*Social Studies*

I thought that if I ate the food of the area I was visiting  
That I might assimilate the point of view of the people there  
As if the point of view was somehow in the food  
So I would make no choices myself regarding what food I ate  
I would simply follow the examples, of those around me  
I would study menus very carefully  
Making note of important differences and similarities  
When shopping at the supermarket  
I felt a great desire to walk off with someone else's groceries  
So I could study them at length  
And study their effects on me  
As though if I ate their groceries I would become that person;  
Until I finished their groceries  
And we might find ourselves going to the same places  
Running into one another at the movies  
Or in a shopping mall  
Reading the same books  
Watching the same T.V. programs  
Wearing the same clothes  
Travelling to the same places  
And taking the same pictures  
Getting sick at the same time  
And getting well again simultaneously  
Finding ourselves attracted to the same people  
Working at the same job  
And making the same amount of money  
Living identical lives as long as the groceries lasted

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<sup>xx</sup> Etcetera member and my current performance partner, Russell Garbutt would go on to devise and perform with Compagnie Philippe Genty in *Stowaways* (1996 – 1998) a work commissioned and produced in Australia, which later toured internationally

<sup>xxi</sup> For more information on John Kaldor's contribution and support for the contemporary arts, his website provides information about his collection and projects he has supported over many years, go to <http://www.kaldorartprojects.org.au/about/john-kaldor>

<sup>xxii</sup> Keith Johnstone (1933 -) was born in the UK and entered the Royal Court Theatre as a new playwright in 1956: a decade later he emerged as a groundbreaking director and teacher of improvisation. His decisive book *Impro* (1979), described Johnstone's unique system of training: weaving together theories and techniques to encourage spontaneous, collaborative creation using the intuition and imagination of the actors. He founded the Theatre Machine Improvisation group in the UK in the 60s and was co-founder and Artistic Director of The Loose Moose Theatre Company in Calgary, Canada in the 70s, 80s and 90s. Johnstone is one of the few internationally recognised authorities in the field of improvisation, creating forms such as *Theatresports* and inspiring theatre greats and beginners alike; his work continues to influence practice within and beyond the traditional theatre.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Founded in 1966 People Show is the longest running alternative theatre company in the UK. Currently People Show is a core group of seven artists who work together, and also independently, with a much wider network of Associate Artists who have been and continue to be involved with the company on a show-by-show basis. The People Show is committed to making multi-disciplinary, multi-media live theatre that is directly informed by the personalities and skills of the individuals working within the company at any given time. The company has a commitment to creating theatre in its widest sense, embracing emergent technologies whilst remaining sensitive to the human scale <http://www.peopleshow.co.uk>

<sup>xxiv</sup> ReadyMade Works Inc. is a not for profit studio in Ultimo, Sydney that 'provides support for the dance and moving arts community...'. The studio was made available to us by then director, dance artist, Samantha Chester. For more information go to <http://www.readymadeworks.com.au/>