

12 Stages of the Alm

Aldona Cunningham
London University

The director Julia Bardsley and myself as designer undertook 12 Stages of the Alm as a research project into the complexity of the creative process between 1996–2000 in London. We aimed at exploring the threshold between the authentic and the fake, shifts from operative to speculative space, finding ways to critique the theatre through creative means and arrive at a form of theatre that would provide a framework where these concerns could find expression.

Project Background

The Alm grew out of a production of Hamlet (of which it is an anagram) at the London Young Vic in 1994 directed by Julia, which I designed. Julia chose Hamlet because it contained within it many buried themes we wanted to uncover. The piece allowed us to explore the nature of theatre, its very preoccupation being the idea of theatre as microcosm. In Hamlet, Shakespeare uses theatre as both form and metaphor by which to pose and explore fundamental questions such as “the endless play of ideas around the theme of identity and the self, duality and the echo, the mirror and self-reflection.”¹

In Hamlet we placed ourselves within the fiction as Magician and Assistant, conjuring the play into the theatre arena. We thus became mute manipulators of the space, a cross between circus and cabaret or fairground spectre of a theatre long gone. The Magician and Assistant exposed the artificiality of theatre, simultaneously highlighting our persistence with the deception of certainty.

The production proved to be our theatrical swansong. We realised the stage spaces we were creating were shrinking – a visual metaphor for what we saw as the gradual contraction and erosion of creative possibilities within the theatre context.

As a means to investigate and understand this particular theatrical episode, “they wanted to develop a project that would act as a personal site for debate, posing questions within a creative framework. The artists felt compelled to bury themselves, effect their own disappearance, in order to continue.”²

Reality

As a consequence we removed ourselves from theatre as architecture and institution and *The Alm* created a context through which we were free to embark on a creative journey that drew on our autobiographical experiences within theatre. The seeds had been sown; we wanted to reformat theatre. "They retreat to a hermetic place to lick their wounds before their lips are sealed. 'the rest is silence'."³

Within the process we as artists formed a multi layered fiction combining real experiences and memories with experiences and research filtered through the different personae we inhabited, just as the author Peter Ackroyd in his novels blends: "Past and present, fact and fiction most of which revolves around the city of London, evoked as a sinister brooding metaphor, haunted and animated by its past and its characters, both real and imaginary."⁴

In embracing the creative process we oscillated between the speculative and operative where the line between authentic and fake became blurred.

The operative space – The sisters

The sisters were physical manifestations of Hamlet, appropriating the themes of the Young Vic production: "*Identity & the Double, Disguise & the Art of Transformation, the Ear & the Question, Illusion & Reality*".⁵ "They were transformed by the artifice of wigs, make-up and costume and placed the fake sisters in the authentic city of London."⁶ "They created & assumed the personas of 'partially deaf' identical twin sisters, figments of the artists' imaginations, decoys to assist them in their enquiries. Surveillance was undertaken and research compiled."⁶

The sisters as a physical representation of theatre incorporated: Memory – Geography – Strata – Disguise – Dispossession – Transformation – Theatrical epitaph – Cultural Critique – Fiction – Authenticity – Identity.

They had no history, they were a construct, anthropologists of the theatre, researching a tragic event that took place known only as *The Alm*.

The City of London became the stage for a series of investigations, a memory theatre, an elaborate mnemonic system scattered with traces, marks, clues.

The sisters devised walks and excursions, studied the names of streets in London that related to Theatre terminology, Hamlet and Shakespeare, and mapped out routes and embarked on psychogeographic walks. Outside our studio, we as artists were transformed in character, all actions, perceptions and behaviour informed by our investigations.

The sisters were improvising using it as a source of creativity that opened up the imagination.

“Improvisation is a way of shifting the boundaries within which we see our world. In being receptive to the immediate moment and tuning into our sensations, feelings, dreams, we begin our own narrative of discovery that differs from the received narratives of our culture.”⁷



FIG 1 Surveillance picture of ‘The Sisters’ (Bard and Ham Cunningsley) at the opening night of ‘Elsinore’ at the Royal National Theatre London. Photo taken by Sandra Cunningham.

The city walks in our search for forensic evidence from theatres and productions associated with Shakespeare and Hamlet in particular, revealed the origins of some of the terms in the history and geography of the city, whilst simultaneously creating a mnemonic mapping in the context of *The Alm*. In these guises we were anonymous, enabling us to remain focussed on our task. When visiting theatre shows there was surveillance put in place by ‘the artists’ spying on, and recording, the activities of the sisters. “They observed spectacles: The Mousetrap, Elsinore & The Globe. The sisters became the sole dramatis personae in a monochrome Dumbshow.”⁸

On one walk the sisters visited the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers and encountered direct questioning on what they were doing from a man working in the Worshipful Company of Apothecaries. They explained their research and interests and he subsequently offered to show them

around the building and to explain its history. The sisters as 'authentic' beings had prevailed.

The sisters emanated a particular atmosphere that they carried with them that was operating on a different plane as they took forensic evidence from sites, wrote notes, observed, communicating through sign language.

The speculative space – Magus and Soro Mystica

"The magician in his tail coat & beard transforms into the animal magus his wand now a white cane. The assistant with her feather boa & headdress turns into flight the bird with clipped wings. They retreat to an hermetic place to lick their wounds before their lips are sealed . . . 'the rest is silence'. In the cavity of imagination, they embark on a subtle theatre of the mind. This speculative laboratory is filled with ritual furniture necessary to continue contemplation of the invisible."⁹



FIG 2 The Magus and Soro Mystica. 'In the cavity of imagination, they embark on a subtle theatre of the mind. This speculative laboratory is filled with ritual furniture necessary to continue contemplation of the invisible.'
Photo taken by Julia Bardsley.



FIG 3 The sisters perform the ritualistic murder and transformation of themselves, they end in ashes and are ignited by the transformative effects of fire, somewhere in the city of London. Film still from 12 stages/2: [a forensic mnemonic]. Camera Andrew Poppy.

The world of the magus and *soro mystica* does not reside in concrete reality – it exists in consciousness, thought and reality. The inhabited space is speculative, in the air, in the minds and memories of others. They are spectres, spirits, which exist in a timeless capsule. Their laboratory is in their heads: a sort of memory theatre.

The speculative space occupied by these personae established a mental environment. As artists we could experiment using ingredients from sources not directly linked to theatre, but share terminology and concepts relating to the creative process, and future potentials of, theatre, such as gardening, bee keeping, healing, medical science and operating theatres, the hermetic tradition, the iconography of alchemy, the invisible colleges of the Rosicrucians and Freemasonry, the conspiracy theories surrounding Robert Fludd, John Dee and Shakespeare, and then appropriating them in the context of the manifestations.

The Manifestations

Sites visited became places to carry out ritual enactments used as mnemonic loci. In *The Art of Memory* Francis Yates describes how one finds a place or Loci in which to situate images which are “forms, marks or simulacra of what we wish to remember.”¹⁰

In reference to Ad Herenium, a system for developing memory circa 86-82bc, she writes: “Our author [...] has clearly got hold of the idea of helping memory by arousing emotional affects through these striking and unusual images, beautiful or hideous, comic or obscene. And it is clear he is thinking of human images [...] of figures dramatically engaged in some sort of activity.”¹¹

The manifestations of *The Alm* took the form of:

- Transformation Equation – a 15 minute video & annotated article for Live Art Magazine.
- *12/Stages2: [a forensic mnemonic]* – a 34 minute film of shadows, following geographic clues
- *12/Stages3: [a memory theatre]* – an installation of photos, projections and items of evidence

The film *12 Stages2 (a forensic mnemonic)* evolved as a pseudo documentary, a criminal investigation of deception, forensic debris and disappearance. We became investigative film-makers, following and recording the sisters, as they undertook their own investigation. Inter-cut into this seemingly ‘real’ landscape are fragments of a parallel narrative. Memory flashbacks break through, taking the viewer momentarily into the internal, subconscious world of the sisters. The parallel layers of narrative act as forms of explanation and illumination, but are simultaneously deliberate acts of concealment.



FIG 4 The factual and the fake converge. The artists investigate the traces left by the sisters before the curtain comes down. Film still from *12/stages2: [a forensic mnemonic]*. Camera Andrew Poppy.

The film offers an alternative map of the city of London; buildings, streets, locations take on a new significance, forming an elaborate memory system, the backdrop for allegorical happenings.

The photographs *12 stages3 (a memory theatre)* record the sisters in tableaux depicting rituals that map the process by which they, and *The Alm* came into being. They act as visual riddles, a lexicon of mysteries laced with cryptic codes and clues. They also act as Memory Theatre, fragments of a performance half-remembered, distorted through the filter of time, represented as a silent show.

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FIG 5 iv the turnings: i. into flight, 4/12 Photographs from *12/Stages3:[a memory theatre]*
Photograph taken by Julia Bardsley and Aldona Cunningham

The photographs were installed in a traditional proscenium theatre space.

It seemed apt at this stage to re-enter the theatre on our own terms. Having penetrated the curtain, photographs of the twelve stages were revealed in infra-red light, as in a dark room, the audience provided with torches to view the photos close up, a show that might once have existed, presented in a mute and frozen state – a photographic performance of *The Alm*. Visitors were unsure whether they were seeing photos of an actual performance that had taken place, the photographs had actually been taken by us using a self timer. The camera was the only witness to the events that had been enacted.



FIG 6 vi the cut presents the wounded mouthtrap, 6/12 Photographs from 12/Stages3: [a memory theatre] Photograph taken by Julia Bardsley and Aldona Cunningham.

Conclusion

This form of theatre research challenges categorisation; was *The Alm* Theatre, Fine Art, Performance Art or Installation?

The Alm transpired as an ongoing, open-ended transitional point for us as artists; we created our own unique framework within which to operate.

The sisters were our means to examine what was happening in contemporary theatre from a different perspective. The visual manifestations of *The Alm* project were a means of disseminating our findings and experimenting with other forms through which to re-enter the arts arena. The sisters had an unique relationship to real theatre spaces. They were entering as audience, anthropologists, curators and observers.

This research was not destined to find answers. We benefited as a part of personal, ongoing speculation; our relationship to mainstream theatre institutions and buildings was transformed.

Julia Bardsley continues to push the boundaries of performance in contemporary theatre, removing herself from mainstream theatre but retaining reference to theatre in the broader sense and collaborating with professionals from outside the realm of performance. By operating as a sole artist she remains open to the complexities of the creative process.

I have continued researching the creative process through pedagogy, developing forms of teaching and learning that encourages students to adopt a lateral approach to scenography, evolving appropriate methodologies in a range of performance contexts.

The fiction we developed combined authentic research with a filtered and transformed version of events through both history and personal experience.

The theatre provides only the memory of what has been seen and heard to take with us. "Who can articulate or even experience what is real and what is not? And why would we want to? For this uncertainty is the pleasure and pain of both Art and Life."¹²

Compiled and written by Aldona Cunningham from research materials by Julia Bardsley & Aldona Cunningham, London November 2008

(Endnotes)

- 1 _____ Julia Bardsley: "HAMLET: as a manifestation of 'THE HOMUNCULUS PROBLEM'", *PUCK* no.11, Institute International de la Marionette 1998
- 2 _____ Julia Bardsley and Aldona Cunningham: "Transformation Equation" annotated article: *Live Art Magazine*, issue no. 30, Pyramid Press 2000
- 3 _____ Ibid.
- 4 _____ www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?P=auth148, 30th November 2008
- 5 _____ Julia Bardsley and Aldona Cunningham: "Transformation Equation" annotated article: *Live Art Magazine*, issue no. 30, Pyramid Press 2000
- 6 _____ Ibid.
- 7 _____ Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay: *Body, Space, Image*, Dance Books 1990, Introduction
- 8 _____ Julia Bardsley and Aldona Cunningham: "Transformation Equation" annotated article: *Live Art Magazine*, issue no. 30, Pyramid Press 2000
- 9 _____ Ibid.
- 10 _____ Francis Yates: *The Art of Memory* (Ark Edition 1985) Ark Paperbacks 1966, p. 6
- 11 _____ Ibid., p.10
- 12 _____ Julia Bardsley: "HAMLET: as a manifestation of 'THE HOMUNCULUS PROBLEM'", *PUCK* no.11, Institute International de la Marionette 1998