

# Introduction: Navigating the Field of Contemporary Performance

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**Bree Hadley** is Senior Lecturer in Performance Studies in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. Her research investigates the construction of identity in contemporary performance, concentrating on the way artists marked by gender, race or (dis)ability mobilise images and media from the public sphere to subvert stereotypes. She has a particular interest in practices that position spectators as co-performers, the performativity of spectatorship, and the efficacy and ethics of such co-performances. Hadley's research has appeared in a range of journals including *Performance Research*, *About Performance*, *Australasian Drama Studies*, *Brolga: An Australian Journal About Dance*, *Liminalities*, *Scope Journal of Film & TV Studies*, *M/C Media and Culture Journal*, and *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management*, amongst others.

**Caroline Heim** is a Lecturer in Performance Studies at Queensland University of Technology. Her research into theatre audiences focuses on audience co-creativity in mainstream theatre. Caroline's PhD (UQ) explored and trialled a new model for post-performance discussions. Recent publications include "Argue with Us': Audience Co-creation through Post-performance Discussions" (2012) in *NTQ*, "Tutorial facilitation in the Humanities based on the tenets of Carl Rogers" (2011) in *Higher Education* and "Marginalising the Mainstream: a signed performance of The Miracle Worker places deaf issues centre-stage" (2010) in *M/C Journal*. Much of Caroline's research is informed by her theatre company productions. Crossbow Productions produces contemporised biographical plays in New York, Sydney and Brisbane. Before entering academia Caroline worked on the New York stage winning a Drama League Award.

According to that cardinal and oft-maligned coordinate of contemporary knowledge-making Wikipedia, "A compass is a navigational instrument that measures directions in a frame of reference that is stationary relative to the surface of the earth."<sup>1</sup> A compass provides us with directions—but, as this definition indicates, its frame of reference tends to assume that our world is made up of stationary landscapes, locations and coordinates that can be stably mapped. "The frame of reference," Wikipedia continues, "defines four cardinal directions (or points)—north, south, east and west."<sup>2</sup> "On Earth," it tells us, "...[m]ost [compasses or] devices for orientation therefore operate by finding north first, although any other direction is equally valid, if it can be reliably located."

But where is the North? Where is the 'true North' of geographical, cultural, aesthetic, technological or political practice we might first locate to start navigating the terrain in front of us?

In Brisbane, we consider ourselves North—perhaps not as far North as Far North Queensland, but certainly North of the South in Sydney, Melbourne, the Southern Ocean, Antarctica and so forth. We are not, however, certain that anyone, in any sphere of geographical, cultural, aesthetic, technological or political practice, operates by finding us first.

Perhaps this is because we—though North of some, South of others, East or West of others still—are not necessarily easy to locate, identify and define?

Or perhaps this is because we are not necessarily clear and non-contradictory when it comes to the locations, landscapes and coordinates of our own identities? Can we, as Mercator suggests in his *Atlas*, reshuffle the coordinates of the compass according to our own orientations?<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps, then, this is because we are still in the process of finding, defining or (re)defining ourselves?

Certainly, we in Brisbane have spent a lot of time identifying, debating and defining what is distinctive about our drama, theatre and performance culture over the last few years. In 2009, John Baylis' *Mapping Queensland Theatre* Report, an Arts Queensland sponsored survey of the field designed to inform future policy, funding and support for the sector, criticised Brisbane's theatre ecology. According to Baylis, although Brisbane has a number of excellent mainstage companies, independent companies, and venues, Brisbane's theatre ecology has gaps in terms of producers, presentation platforms and career pathways, and this is why Brisbane's levels of activity are lower than levels of activity in southern capitals such as Sydney and Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> As we have argued in one of our own recent analyses of Brisbane's theatre ecology, though, an ecological perspective would suggest that a 'healthy' ecosystem is defined by vital, viable and sustainable relationships amongst activities rather than by volume of activities alone.<sup>6</sup> This means trying to replicate the theatre culture of our southern neighbours is not necessarily the best way to ensure the 'health' of our own theatre culture. We—like the many practitioners, practices, contexts and cultures the authors of the articles in this collection consider—need to chart out our own maps, our own major coordinates or concerns within these maps, and our own ways of navigating the (constantly changing) terrain.

Indeed, if our performing arts ecologies are to be 'healthy,' then we probably need to maintain a 'healthy' skepticism about any set of maps, coordinates or navigation methods that suggest themselves to be authoritative representations of any sphere of personal, social, performance, cultural or political practice. "A map," Wikipedia tells us, "is a visual representation of an area—a symbolic depiction highlighting relationships between elements of that space such as objects, regions and themes."<sup>7</sup> Maps, like laws, contracts and institutions, are what Gilles Deleuze calls instruments of "codification."<sup>8</sup> Maps codify identities for spaces, places and the people that inhabit them—and, in the process, establish roles, rules and hierarchies that constrain as much as enable our capacity to think, talk about or do things. Maps tell us where to go. Maps tell us what landmarks to see along the way. Maps trace out the contours and coordinates of the terrain and, of course, mark out the margins where it is best to exercise caution, as we enter that *terra incognita* beyond the boundaries of safe, codified, classified identities and knowledges. In this respect, conventional maps function more as what Deleuze and Felix Guattari call tracings—codifications of supposedly predetermined relationship—than what they call a true map. They are neither modifiable, nor open to "rework[ing] by an individual, group, or social formation."<sup>9</sup>

Most of the drama, theatre and performance studies artists, scholars and advocates we know tend to like to work across, around or in the margins of conventional maps, challenging their certainties, and coming up with new ways of thinking, talking about and doing things. They like, in other words, to adopt the fluid identity position Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call 'the nomad'<sup>10</sup>—the one who moves around the map, reversing it, adapting it, tearing it up, and reforming it. This approach is clear in the way our cross-cultural, cross-media and cross-disciplinary practices traverse, transform and reform theatrical styles and techniques. This approach is also increasingly clear in the way a blend of performance, research, and performance as research underpins much of our scholarships, traversing, transforming and reforming scholarly style and technique too.

This interest in nomadic moves across cultures, media, disciplines and modes of theorising them is not necessarily a sign of any lack of respect for history, for conventions, or for the conventional maps, coordinates or navigation methods of our field. On the contrary, most drama, theatre and performance studies scholars seem to recognise that mapping practices, both historical and contemporary, have in most cases been well-meaning. They have been designed to help us navigate through our personal, professional and intellectual lives, and do the work we need to do—particularly the teaching, administration and community advocacy and service work we need to do—without getting lost. Still, most of the scholars we know do not have blind faith in the maps history hands down to us. Rather, they read maps, as first intended by Mercator, "as a mirror [. . .] to lead us to higher speculation"<sup>11</sup> of our own identity. Sometimes, these maps continue us on a path to a

place we do not want to go. Sometimes, these maps try to make us all take the same path when we do not necessarily want to. And sometimes, for better or for worse, the very contours of the landscape—geographical, cultural, aesthetic, technological or political—shift, and we need to be able to navigate our way through uncertain territory whether we like it or not.

As Laurence Gonzales argues in *Deep Survival*, the people most likely to survive in times of crisis or change are those who can navigate according to a map—a mental picture of the world, and how it works—that is constantly changing. As Gonzales says, if you cannot “update your map and persist in following it even when the landscape (or your compass) tries to tell you its wrong,”<sup>12</sup> you are in trouble. If you cannot recognise that your old map may no longer represent the landscape, then you may die in the forest—whether it is the kind populated by trees, or the kind populated by social systems, institutions and norms.

We in Brisbane, Australia, and Australasia more broadly are, of course, all too well aware of the way the locations, landscapes and coordinates of our identities can change without warning or a chance to control them. In the year leading up to the Australasian Association for Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies (ADSA) Annual Conference 2012 locations, landscapes and the seismic shifts that can happen in them made themselves felt for most academics and artists in the region. For some of us, the landslips were literal—floods, cyclones and continuing earthquakes. For some, the landslips were more metaphorical—the threats of closure, funding cuts or job cuts that have become a sadly constant point of reference in the Higher Education landscape of late. Naturally, not all the shifts, changes and surprises have been negative. There have been successes too, including new jobs, funding, publications and programs for a number of members of the ADSA community. We have, for example, been pleased to see the strength of scholarship in areas like performance as research, scenography, and site specific performance continue to grow. Some of that scholarship is represented in the articles in this collection, in Kate Hunter, Rea Dennis and Linda Hassall’s discussions of performance as research, in Michael Smalley and Kirsty Volz’s discussions of staging, scenography and design, or in Julie Shearer and Paul Davies’ discussions of site-specific performance, for instance.

It is shifts, slips and constant calls to learn to navigate a changing landscape—both positive and negative—that have prompted us to ask the questions at the core of the ADSA Conference 2012. What are the compass points, the north, south, east, west and centre, of the landscape of performance practice and scholarship in Australasia? In what ways are they shifting, growing and changing? We are, in asking these questions, looking to the positive. We want to map the past, celebrate the possibilities of the present, and find new directions for the future. We in drama, theatre and performance studies are a strong discipline, and a strong (inter)disciplinary community, with a will to push forward and pursue our passions. During the floods in Brisbane last year, then Premier Anna Bligh said “As we weep for what we have lost, and as we grieve for family and friends and we confront the challenge that is before us, I want us to remember who we are. We are Queenslanders. We are the people they breed tough North of the border. We’re the ones that they knock down, and we get up again.”<sup>13</sup> Whatever we think of it, this quote speaks of strength, resilience and determination to push through, and we think the ADSA community too is characterised by the strength, resilience and determination sometimes needed to push through the rough patches to continue to create and report on some of the most meaningful elements of our local, national and international cultural landscapes. We are pleased to be able to capture a small part of that creating and reporting here in what is, on our part, an experiment of sorts in creating an ADSA Conference Proceedings launched at the time of the conference itself.

The collection of articles offered here has come together as a result of a specific, separate call for papers for a Conference Proceedings that went out at the same time as the call for papers for the Conference. We asked for papers ready to be published as complete papers, reporting on performance pieces, programs or projects that have already taken place, and that offer interesting insights into the themes in focus at the Conference. In

this sense, this collection was always intended to be a selection, or a snapshot, rather than a summary of every working paper presented at this year's Conference. With the assistance of a large group of peer reviewers read, reviewed and made recommendations, we do think we have offered that snapshot, a group of papers that speaks in interesting ways to themes prominent at this year's conference. In the first section, *Creating Performances: Identity, Memory and Meaning-Making*, Kate Hunter, Rea Dennis and Linda Hassall discuss performance as research, each focusing in slightly different way on the ways in which memory, landscape and culture inform own plays and performances. In the second section, *Mise-En-Scene: Scenography, Intermediality and Meaning-Making*, the authors focus more specifically on site, space and scenography as a means of depicting identities, memories and landscapes in contemporary performance practice. Michael Smalley advocates developing an aesthetic sensibility amongst theatre designers and technicians. Kirsty Volz then offers analyses design work, and its relation to aesthetics and culture, in David Williamson's *Don's Party*. In the third section, *Public Space Performance: Identity, Society, Subversion*, Julie Shearer and Paul Davies move beyond the mainstream stage into cultural spaces and places, examining two performances—*Taxi* and *Sir Don vs the Rat Pack*—that use participatory public space performance to make their impact. In the fourth and final section, *Performance Across Space, Place and Time: Australasian Readings of Australasian, Asian and American Practices*, James McKinnon, Megan Evans and Nathan Hurwitz consider how theatre makers engage with a range of texts and thematic in cultural and cross-cultural performances in Australasia, Asia, and America, ranging from performances of Shakespeare in New Zealand, to Opera in China, to Musicals in the United States of America.

The authors features in this collection all understand meaning making in contemporary performance to be the result of disparate elements including body, memory, text, technology and geography in its broadest sense. These elements are, as Hassall (following Chaudhuri) and Shearer (following Lefebvre) argue in their articles, always invested with, mediated through or interpreted within symbolic frameworks that extend the signifiatory possibilities of the everyday. When examined in what McKinnon calls their 'cultural and material context,' these elements offer insight into the way a whole range of diverse, different contemporary performance practices can work to 'construct, reinforce, challenge, and destabilise competing notions of identity.' The articles in this collection offer just this sort of investigation. Though the authors' lens' move from the personal, to the performative, to the political, they all say something about the way our private, public and social lives are presented and counter-presented in performance practices, and the shifting compass points of performance practices in Brisbane, Australia, Australasia and beyond.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia (2012a) Compass. Retrieved May 1, 2012, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compass>.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia (2012a) Compass.

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia (2012b) Cardinal Directions. Retrieved May 1, 2012, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardinal\\_direction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardinal_direction).

<sup>4</sup> Mercator (1636) "Preface", p. I.

<sup>5</sup> Baylis, John. *Mapping Queensland Theatre*. Arts Queensland: Brisbane, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Makeham, Hadley & Kwok (forthcoming 2012) "A 'Value Ecology' Approach to the Performing Arts," *MC Journal* 15.3 Ecology. Available online [www.journal.media-culture.org.au](http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au).

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia (2009b) Map. Retrieved October 3, 2009, from [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Map](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Map).

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1997) Nomad Thought. In D. Allison (ed) *The new Nietzsche : Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, MIT Press: Cambridge, 142-149, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Mercator.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

<sup>12</sup> Laurence Gonzales (2004) *Deep Survival*, Norton & Company: New York, p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Bligh, 13/01/2011