

*“Through the Lens:  
Developing Praxis in Studio Theatre Production”*<sup>1</sup>

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*Author’s Note:* I started my career as a PhD student at the City University of New York Graduate School as the Managing Editor of Daniel Gerould’s journal *Slavic and Eastern Performance*, and I learned much about writing, editing, and Eastern European performance from Dan during those years. I took many of his classes (and was patiently tutored in French for the language exam by him as well) and learned that I loved research, and that, like Dan, I could follow my own quirky paths into archives, theories, conversations, and performances that could be the basis of my own work. As my own research has spanned a range from cyborg theatre to animal studies to cabinets of curiosity, I would like to think that I have done Dan proud in this regard. In a special issued dedicated to my mentor and friend Dan Gerould then, it seems unusual that my submission is not more specifically focused on the kind of work I learned about or wrote in response to Dan’s own interests—Eastern European Performance, Melodrama, Theatre Theory, Symbolism and the Avant-Garde, and so much more. This is because at C.U.N.Y. I also watched and learned much from someone who loved teaching; he loved to be in front of the class, and in the hours beforehand you could see him reviewing his dog-eared index cards, hundreds collected from his own research, which he would soon impart to his eager students. The essay I am including here then follows the trajectory of this pedagogical strand of Dan’s impact upon me. He inspired me to love what I do, and to do it with ongoing dedication. And just as a nod to those early days working on his journal *SEEP*, I’ve asked Ed Ligan if I could format it accordingly in honor of Dan, a great teacher, writer, and editor: so Garamond, single spaced. For you Dan.

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In “Dramas of Persuasion: Performance Studies and Interdisciplinary Education,” Sally Harrison Pepper discusses a series of techniques she uses to integrate theory and practice in the classroom. She finds that “students’ bodies contain vital tools for learning, and experiential activities simply help students to use their bodies and minds in meaningful and memorable ways . . . in using such experiential learning modes, that when students are physically engaged, deep learning occurs—a kind of learning that can activate key transformational moments.”<sup>2</sup> Following a Freirean pedagogy, Harrison-Pepper here describes a form of “praxis.” For Paolo Freire, what is important is that students “develop a critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world,”<sup>3</sup> as opposed to being passive learners. While this concept of embodied and experiential learning, or “praxis” is now frequently discussed and used in theory or history-based classes, the notion of how these ideas function in practice and practice-based classes is not as widely detailed.<sup>4</sup> One reason may be because practice (and here I am referring to practice in theatrical context, although I suspect this will be true for practice-based disciplines such as dance, music, and art), especially in the US system, often aims to teach skill-sets, or create public performances, and teachers assess their students on how

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<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge the members of my class, without whom I could not be writing this essay: Zezma Abas, Glynn Angell, Rajiv Aubeelack, Louise Brignull, Ollie Coe, Domenik Danielewicz, Lauren Eadon, Maria Falcão, Josh Grigg, Karla Jagers, Sarah Halliwell, Sophie Howell, Cherelle Mitchell, Ella Rice, Kiana Siino. My comments about process and intent are largely based upon classroom conversations and individual student written analysis papers.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Harrison-Pepper, “Dramas of Persuasion: Performance Studies and Interdisciplinary Education,” *Theatre Topics* 9.2 (1999) 142.

<sup>3</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1970, 1993), 54.

<sup>4</sup> English and writing departments have increasingly been engaging with the idea of praxis in the classroom. See, for example, Rochelle Harris, M. Kilian McCurrie, Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet.

well they learned the skills, or in conservatories, on the students' talent. At the University of Roehampton, where I currently teach (and I think this is true of many other similar programs in the UK), the idea of "praxis" is embedded within Drama, Theatre, and Performance programs as a central idea around which to develop both theory and history, as well as practice. Practice-based or production classes are often assessed through "practical essays" in which a student or group of students develop a performance that reflects and engages with the concepts encountered in the class—performance only emerges from research and the extent to which the students demonstrate their engagement with specific aspects of the research in performance is what assessment is based upon, rather than how well they perform. A brilliantly acted scene, for example, may receive a low mark if the students are not at the same time demonstrating the ideas behind the final product.

In a 2002 *Theatre Topics* issue "On Praxis," issue editor Stacy Wolf relied upon Raymond Williams's definition of theory in *Keywords* to define praxis. She writes, "he notes that 'praxis' is a word intended to unite theory with the strongest sense of practical (but not conventional or customary) activity: practice as action."<sup>5</sup> The articles in this issue provide a range of examples and as Wolf states, all "consider practice theoretically." (In particular, Bryant Keith Alexander's article states that "we should encourage our students in performance classes to build and test theory,"<sup>6</sup> yet his example is from a performance and social change class, itself straddling a border between theory and practice.) Freire writes that, "even if the people's thinking is superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions in action that they can change. Producing and acting upon their own ideas—not consuming those of others—must constitute that process."<sup>7</sup> Although Freire's ideas had been through their share of critique and analysis, as pedagogue Irvin Peckham points out, "it is impossible to transport Freire. One can only reinvent him."<sup>8</sup> A Freirean sense of practice as action has influenced my own pedagogical philosophy and drives the praxis process for the work I undertake with students in a module entitled, Studio Theatre Production (STP), a class I teach each Spring.

There is a space between wondering and experiencing or doing, a raw and complicated space, a risk taking, provocative space that is the space of praxis. This is the space of the classroom, a place to rehearse these unknowns, these "what ifs." The classroom I refer to here is not what Freire considers "banking education," in which knowledge is deposited into a passive receptacle/student, but instead this classroom is an open space of dialectic and engagement, falling into what Freire calls "problem-posing education." It is a space also perhaps that relies on Jacques Rancière's equality of intelligences, in which a pedagogue "does not teach . . . knowledge to the students" but instead "commands them to venture forth in the forest, to tell what they see, what they think of what they have seen, to check it and so on."<sup>9</sup> Both Freire and Rancière here argue for pedagogy that is a give and take, a pedagogy of possibility and of praxis.

This essay focuses upon one specific project and my own pedagogical methodology within the Studio Theatre Production module, which is a second year production-based class I have taught since I began working at Roehampton in 2005. The class is made up of sections, generally two to four sections of approximately fifteen to twenty students each, and the class is semester-long, meeting twice a week for two and a half to three hours per session. The module is tutor-led in that while there is some

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<sup>5</sup> Stacy Wolf, *Theatre Topics*, Volume 12, Number 1, March 2002, and quoting Williams, Raymond. *Keywords*. 1983. Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 318.

<sup>6</sup> Bryant Keith Alexander, "Intimate Engagement: Student Performances as Scholarly Endeavor," *Theatre Topics*, Volume 12, Number 1, March 2002, 86.

<sup>7</sup> Freire, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Irvin Peckham, "Freirean Codifications: Changing Walls into Windows," *Pedagogy*, Volume 3, Issue 2, Spring 2003, 228. This article provides an excellent overview of the critiques and objections to Freire's theories.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *ArtForum*. March 2007. FindArticles.com. 26 Aug. 2008. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_7\\_45/ai\\_n24354915](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_45/ai_n24354915)

independent work involved, the tutor comes to the class with an idea around which to begin. The “module specification” (in the UK, these are set and can be adapted individually in terms of content as long as the learning outcomes and modes of assessment remain unchanged) describes the class as such:

Students on this course will be engaged in rehearsing and staging a studio-based performance event for a public audience. The production will be supervised by a member of staff, who will act in an agenda-setting role, nominating a set of specific performance challenges and performance research questions (for example, exploring the specific conventions of a dramatic text, or examining the methodologies of a particular theatre-making company, or elaborating imaginatively upon a theme for a devised theatre). Tutors will also guide students through appropriate research and rehearsal strategies towards a production that makes demonstrable and effective critical engagement with the tasks and challenges set.<sup>10</sup>

The work produced in this module (by myself and other tutors) in the time I have been at Roehampton has ranged from fully devised work to adaptations of play texts, to adaptations of novels. My own practice has so far been devised, and one of the goals of my pedagogy has been that the students emerge from the process with an awareness of how to approach devising, as many of them go on to a third (and final in the UK undergraduate system) year independent production module. For clarification, by “devised” I mean collaboratively created. As Dee Heddon and Jane Milling point out in their book *Devising Performance*, British and Australian companies seem to prefer the term devising, while US companies favor the term collaborative creation. For Heddon and Milling, despite the term used, “at the core of all devising or collaborative creation is a *process* of generating performance, although there is an enormous variety of devising processes used.”<sup>11</sup> These processes are at the core of locating and then entering into a space of praxis. The various methods vary within performance companies as well as in the classroom. How do we as pedagogues, once inside this space, provoke students, many prepared by their past experiences to be “baked upon” rather than the active “transformers of a world”? In his essay “Better Teaching through Provocation,” Philosophy professor Jon Mills writes that “Knowledge without personal meaning is passionless, while personal belief without knowledge is blind.”<sup>12</sup> My goal in this module was to both have the students begin to explore technologies in performance within an environment of learning new tools and hopefully stimulating their personal passion for the project. My goal as a pedagogue is to 1. have the students develop a “tool box” of approaches to devising which they can choose from in future work, and 2. to allow the devising process itself emerge from the research and topic of the performance project. Both goals are designed to empower the students through an embodied learning that will hopefully spark a personal interest and lead them on a creative learning journey.

## THE PROJECT

In the Spring term of 2007 I began work with a group of fifteen students in Studio Theatre Production (STP). As the Spring approached, as is the case every year, I wondered what to bring to the class. The year before I was inspired by a French film, *La Jetee*, and used it as a catalyst to explore ideas of memory and image. In the years that have followed I have developed pieces such as one based around a podcast found on National Public Radio in the US about Mitterrand’s last meal, in

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<sup>10</sup> Studio Theatre Production Module Handbook, 2007/8. Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies Programme, Roehampton University, See programme website for details:

<http://studentzone.roehampton.ac.uk/programmedetails/ug/dramatheatreperformancestudies/index.asp>

<sup>11</sup> Jane Milling and Deirdre Heddon, *Devising Performance: A Critical History*, (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Mills, “Better Teaching through Provocation,” *College Teaching*, Winter 98, Vol. 46 Issue 1, no page, online access: <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=357415&site=ehost-live>

which the French President had an elaborate meal revolving around a tiny songbird, the Ortolan, prepared as the last meal he would eat before dying of cancer. Another year I worked with students to adapt Yann Martell's novel *Beatrice and Virgil* to incorporate questions of animality and with a research task of exploring the two central characters (a taxidermied Donkey and Howler Monkey) through puppets that the students built and operated. This process of finding a suitable starting point is often agonizing as I wait for something to inspire me—as this catalyst has to be multifaceted and have research and theatrical possibilities that might be inspirational for the students in my group. In 2007 I made my decision based on two factors: one, I knew I had several students in my section who had just taken New Media and Performance with me in the Autumn term, and, two, I had just been to see director Katie Mitchell's adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* at the National Theatre in London.<sup>13</sup> These two factors inspired the process for creating what later became *Through the Lens*, a piece that explored how labor is produced in multi-media productions. I adapted the generic module handbook (which the students also received) to create one specific to the undertaking of this particular project (See Appendix A). My section was called “What's film got to do with it?” and my module content raised possible questions for research and analysis between the forms of film and theatre that I felt made a good basis for the development of performance.

The production of *Waves* became one of our starting points, and because it was running at the National Theatre all autumn, the students were encouraged to see it. It narrated the Woolf story through multiple technologies on stage. With the *mise en scène* of a radio drama, actors removed props from large shelves lining the walls of the space and used them to merge with cameras and microphones to create a visual or aural effect and create scenes on a large screen upstage—for example, an actor placed her hands into two large shoes and walked them through a box filled with pebbles as a microphone picked up the sounds of walking to provide a sound effect for the story's narrative. Or, in other instances, one actor holds a tree branch in front of a window frame while another sprays water on it, while the camera projects it onto the screen creating the effect of a stormy day outside the window. In another moment, an actor dips her face into a large glass bowl of water while the camera films her face through the water from beneath, creating an eerie image of swimming or drowning which is then projected onto the screen behind her.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps because director Mitchell had retained images (versus textual narrative) from her reading of the novel, (as she described in an article in the newspaper) she decided to devise a piece based solely on how the images communicate the story, but what struck me and made this an important catalyst for my students, was that, not only did she create the images that told the story using various technologies, such as live sound effects and live video feeds, but also she developed the production by exposing and clearly showing the operation of how the images were structured.<sup>15</sup> The mechanics of production here far overrode the narrative of the piece (in my estimation) but each moment was fascinating to watch through its creation. This idea of exposing the mechanics of the production became for me a major focus of the work I did with this particular group of students, many who were facile with at least interactive technologies of their immediate lives—computer based technologies.

Our process began with a physical-theoretical praxis, in that the students simultaneously began an analytic process that was intertwined with physical theatrical work. We began with the idea

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<sup>13</sup> Mitchell is a British director who is currently an Associate Director for the National Theatre in London.

<sup>14</sup> For a video preview of Mitchell's *Waves* see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTJnuw5VHC8&feature=related> it was restaged at the National in 2008. I have written further about this production in *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> “Breaking the Waves,” by Katie Mitchell, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2006. Accessed on-line: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/artsandentertainment/0,,1944715.00.html>

of film as a medium that required analysis and experimentation into genre, techniques, camera shots, and specific techniques, such as long shots and close ups, for example. My interest was that the students not think about technology in passive viewing ways, conditioned as they are by film and television, but instead begin to unpack interactive uses of technology in which they themselves controlled and exposed these mechanisms of control within the piece. As Heddon and Milling have pointed out, “The use of technology within devised performance inevitably prompts questions about the power of technology—who designs it, who owns it, for what purpose, what is it capable of, how might its uses be recontextualized and redeployed?”<sup>16</sup> I find that students are increasingly incorporating screens and projections and various forms of technology within their work but rarely taking the time to analyze or understand its semiotic significance. My concern was that while the students began bringing into the theatre space many of their experiences of daily technological interactivity, which included email, facebook, youtube and the like, their relationship to these technologies was passive and uncritical. My goal then, was to have them think about applications in their work where they might actively engage; to focus on what we can’t see in these passive applications to technologies.

## THE PROCESS

My own training in practice is from New York University, where I worked with Director Anne Bogart, whose system of Viewpoints is at the heart of much of my pedagogy. Her exercises around time (which include tempo, duration, kinesthetic response repetition) and space (shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationships, topography) help me to develop an ensemble feeling between the students, and her various composition exercises form the foundation for how I guide students into their own action.<sup>17</sup> Bogart has always been interested in film and appropriating its techniques into theatre-making, and I adapted several of her compositions—on editing, point of view, camera techniques—for this project. For example, they were asked to select a five minute film clip from a film of their choice that they were to recreate/reenact/stage in class. They were to consider the following ideas as they devised: camera shots and angles, soundtrack, text, color, costume, composition, architecture, and genre—all ideas that had been discussed and worked on in class more generally.

This exercise yielded results that formed the basis for the structure of the piece. Each group approached the exercise in such different ways. One group, for example, projected the shower scene from the film *Psycho* and created a live soundtrack from sounds inspired by a movie theatre (like Foley artists in film). Another group used a scene from the film *The Shining* and re-created the house in the film by building a physical small scale model which they then filmed with themselves in the film so they could emerge from the projections and interact with the film clip. These initial ideas were eventually transformed into scenes within the piece, *Through the Lens*. After much deliberation about genre and content the students agreed on a version of *Alice in Wonderland* as their content. This process involved a session in which students brought in clips of different genres and in small groups had to attempt to persuade their classmates to agree with their choice of genre. This pedagogical technique not only exercised modes of persuasion but also allowed the groups to

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<sup>16</sup> Heddon and Milling, 212.

<sup>17</sup> See: Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book*, (New York: TCG, 2005). The initial Viewpoints exercises are a set of physical and spatial “warm-up” exercises which serve to encourage the students to work in a group and understand their physical, spatial, and kinesthetic relationships to each other in the space. The composition work is a method of generating short performance exercises based around the use of the physical Viewpoints in tandem with specific content. The composition exercises are open rather than fixed and encourage student’s to use their own imaginations in how they interpret the “ingredients” of the assigned compositions, which can be created to serve any scene, play, or idea.

research definitions of genre, back up their research with example, and then explain to the class how this genre might function in the performance we were devising. One student presented a film version of *Alice in Wonderland* by Czech director Jan Svankmajer called *Alice* (1988) which combined live action and stop-motion animation and also presented the tale in a dark and mysterious manner. The class immediately gave up their previous attraction to the genre of horror when they saw possibilities for the content within the story of *Alice*, which they also saw as a blurring of the genres they had so far been interested in.

The next stage was to begin research on the story and content; the students researched films, theatrical adaptations, book versions, and Lewis Carroll's life, finally deciding on Wonderland as a potential for a technological journey they might take themselves. Out of eleven key scenes they wanted to explore they narrowed it down to four that would become stations in four distinct locations. This process of decision making emerged through what Bogart calls "source work," defined as:

a series of activities done at the beginning of the rehearsal process to get in touch (both intellectually and emotionally, both individually and collectively) with the source from which you are working. It's the time taken (before you begin rehearsing anything the audience might actually witness onstage) to enter with your entire being into the world, the issues, the heart of your material.<sup>18</sup>

Source work is already an engagement with praxis—it involves multiple modes of learning through contact, what Bogart calls "activities," in the possible form of reading, viewing, listening, enacting. Students were encouraged to draw upon sources as obvious as the text of *Alice in Wonderland* and the film versions, but also as varied as songs that connected them to the source, newspaper clippings, or art. As students developed critical contexts for the content and researched through this source work process, they were also immersed in physical exercises and workshops to help them place their physical bodies in relationship to technology, both in practical terms (how to work a camera), and conceptual terms (how to use their bodies as the camera). I will explain two examples of specific exercises used to develop these vocabularies with the students.

One session revolved around viewing work created by British company imitating the dog. This company works frequently with cinematic vocabularies to create their performance. The piece I showed the class was called *Hotel Methuselah*, which integrated the story of a man's amnesia and disorientation with theatricalized cinematic techniques. As described by the company: "The action is viewed through a six metre letterbox-shaped gap, like cinema wide-screen, which only reveals the performers' bodies from knee to neck. A film is projected immediately behind the acting space, which the performers mirror with perfect timing."<sup>19</sup> In 2006 one of the members of the company did a workshop with my New Media class that I was inspired by and attempted to reconstruct for the class. The class was split into two groups and was asked to think of all the different film techniques they could think of and I wrote them on a large white board as they called out: close-up, slow motion, fast forward, dream sequences, freeze frame, etc. I then asked them to think about the story of a bank robbery, and what the dramaturgical elements of this scene might be. They then had twenty minutes to stage a bank robbery using four or five of the film techniques they had thought of—in places they felt would add to the action of the story. This example forced the students to work with cinematic techniques only in terms of their body. The results were impressive and yielded memorable moments such as drawing the black theatre curtains closed as the actors moved from upstage to downstage creating the effect of a camera lens tightening in on a close up. Another moment staged a straightforward shooting of a bank teller that then froze and rewound, which they

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<sup>18</sup> Bogart and Landau, 163.

<sup>19</sup> Imitating the dog website: <http://www.imitatingthedog.co.uk/hotelMethuselah/default.asp>

did in movement as they also rotated the scene so that when the scene was played again it was from a completely different perspective (for example, the teller was first closer to us, so we saw the robbery from behind the bank counter, and then rotated so that we saw it from the robbers perspective with the counter in front of them). These scenes allowed the students to view each other and comment on the techniques they found most theatrically compelling, as well as allowing the students to begin to enact the technologies they often so passively view.

The second exercise was in the form of practical workshops with different stations of technology set up around the theatre space. I was assisted by our technical manager, Jonathan Wilson, who ran sessions going over how the technologies worked at each station, and then both of us moved from location to location to answer any questions. In one area we set up one portable digital camera, equipped with a range of effects the students could try out such as night vision, fish eye effects, and insert screen effects, that the students familiarized themselves with through trial and error. Another area was set aside as a live video feed in which the students could project themselves or a variety of images and objects (maps, old postcards, a snow dome) onto a screen and explore techniques of co-presence—relating a live presence to one projected through the camera, or projecting an image and relating physically to it, or projecting images, colors, texts, onto the bodies standing in front of the screen. Another area of investigation was the sound system and its effects. Although we made some suggestions, Jonathan and I worked to let the students try out ideas, bring in their own props and ideas, and learn by doing. At the end of these sessions the students felt comfortable with hands-on operations and had already encountered techniques they hoped to retain in performance.

Now armed with practical hands-on experience as well as both collective and individual ideas drawn from their research, the students decided on a structure for the piece: four stations or scenes, each in a different space and using different forms of engagement with technology based on the experiments in class. Much of this work was done out of class time in small groups and scenes would be workshopped in class allowing for class feedback and reflection. This was the editing process and, like film, the hope was to retain what worked in relation to the other scenes in the piece and to add or subtract based on these larger discussions. There was also cross-over in group make-up so a throughline could be maintained. A conscious decision was made to develop each scene based on themes and approaches to the technologies they used in each, which I will explain here.

### 1. “Down the Rabbit Hole”

This initial scene was the direct descendant of the *Psycho* exercise in which the students projected the clip and created a live soundtrack. The group this time limited themselves to only sounds inspired by food and food preparation to both represent the picnic Alice is having and to tie in with the tea party scene later on. Their concern technologically was to explore what film is unable to do, which in this case is to present a live aural experience. The group first edited a scene on film that would be projected behind them. They wanted to represent our approach as a hybrid of many technologies and Alices, so they edited together the title from several film versions as the opening. They then cut together several segmented versions of the scene in which Alice wanders off from a picnic and falls down the rabbit hole. The students experimented with hundreds of sounds and worked with microphones and a sound deck to achieve the exact sounds they wanted. For example, in one section, an apple spins slowly on the screen as a student circles the rim of a partially filled wine glass, achieving a high pitched eeeeeee tone to match the apple’s spin. Another example is the moment in which Alice falls—here a student spun a salad spinner into the microphone, creating a whirring noise. In this scene the audience was invited to sit close to the sound tables, setting the

tone for the investigation that became the theme, showing the labor behind the production and exposing the mechanism of technology.

Once this scene ended, the first physical Alice appeared and walked through the audience in the space. She then walked through the screen, which the students designed to be in two pieces, repeating the idea of falling down the rabbit hole, but instead walking into a technological journey. The decision was made to have the rabbit, a student dressed in a cape and rabbit mask, lead the audience from room to room, following the various Alices. The students also played with ideas of identity shifting, which is a feature of on-line scenarios, and decided to have a different Alice in each space—a sort of “everyperson” who is also able to switch identities. Their costuming choices were based on the different films they saw.

## 2. “Eat Me, Drink Me”

In the second scene the students wanted to explore what film could actually do in terms of effects, based upon the experimentation with the cameras in the workshop setting. A group of students decided to make their own film and began by creating a storyboard for the sequence, which they produced on our campus. They worked with the dramaturgy of the story, allowing the narrative to determine the effects they might use. For example, when the physical Alice reaches for the container that says “Drink Me” she is at a standard relationship to the table the container is placed upon, but in order to pick it up she has to enter into the filmic space, so the actor playing Alice “steps” into the film, her physical body disappearing and her filmed body reappearing on screen. Once she has entered into the technological screen, the students making this scene were able to use camera effects and angles to make her appear much smaller or larger than the table. In this scene, they wanted to explore not only the camera’s possibilities but also how their bodies might emerge from the film, creating a hybrid between film and theatre. This precedent had been set up early in the scene when the physical Alice appears to herself in a mirror on screen and mimics her technologized double on screen while she brushes her hair. The actor playing the rabbit also figured prominently in this scene and began a chase sequence with Alice in which one or the other of them was on the screen chasing after and looking at the other, who was live in the audience. The scene gave the students opportunity to interact with the technology while also learning basic film-making techniques.

## 3. “The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party”

Following on the last scene’s theme of hybridity between theatre and film, the Tea Party scene was designed to show a hybridity in content as well as medium. First, the students wanted to represent a multitude of technological characters and multiple identities—signifying an immersion into what was then a still relatively new technology: Facebook. The students were beginning to explore ideas around social media and an increasing ability to connect on line drove the aesthetic design of this scene. As Alice entered the space she was faced with a table upon which a moving technologized tea party was projected, and two computer screens were set up at the table, containing the Mad Hatter from one of the two core films they worked from, and the rabbit from another. Although the images were prerecorded, two of the students sat beneath the table so that their live voices could unite the text.

During the semester one of my students became interested in the possibilities of stop-motion animation through the Svankmayer film and learned the process of how to create short



films. He experimented and shared his results with the class before teaching his group the techniques. The group spent long hours creating a moving tea party.<sup>20</sup> Here a table full of food self-propels itself around a table until it is all consumed and the table is empty. This scene explored how these various mediums—stop motion animation, film and screened images—might translate theatrically.

#### 4. “The Trial”

Finally, we drew upon Katie Mitchell directly for the Trial scene, in which the technology became dually a recording, surveillance device as well as a hybrid interaction between live and media, clearly exposing the methods of creating the projected images. The students here wanted to deepen their understanding and practice of the cameras and film-making techniques that they had experienced both in bodily practice as well as camera manipulation. They felt the trial was an appropriate narrative for an exploration of technology’s potential erasure of individual identities and possible entrapment in the form of surveillance. The camera operators were intentionally exposed, allowing the audience in on how the stage images were made, and care was taken to choreograph the movements so that the actors could both be in character and part of a technical image-making process. Once again, the students astutely understood the relationship between their content and the technology they were using. For example, when the Queen of Hearts beckons to Alice to “come here,” she is an imposing figure, but one also within this world of technology, somehow trapped within it. For this moment the students decided to let the Queen and King appear larger than life, projected on the screen in front of where Alice was seated. The Queen’s beckoning finger is in front of Alice’s face, intimidating despite being trapped in the image. In another moment the tray of biscuits representing Exhibit A, evidence in the trial, appeared as if in a real trial, as a photographic type image, here projected onto the screen for the audience. The students also felt the trial had relevance in contemporary society’s relationship to reality television, and programs like *Jerry Springer* or *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. To achieve this connection they placed Alice in front of the screen during the part of the trial in which the Queen interrogates the Mad Hatter and the Knave of Hearts. The students elected to work with a technique that might be used in television talk or reality shows whereby a smaller screen is inset onto the larger picture to show a different person (often in a different location) from those on the main screen. Alice was almost lulled into passive television viewing until the Queen beckons her, speaking directly through the screen to activate Alice again.

The devising process was interwoven with various readings and discussions around the growing use of media in our lives, and what kind of agency we have in this technological “wonderland.” To this end, the show concluded with Alice’s ultimate control over her journey. As Alice grows bigger in the trial room her image grows on the screen as the camera’s lens closes in on her face. The script written by the students is as follows:

King: Silence. Rule 42, all persons more than a mile high to leave the court.

Alice: I’m not a mile high!

King: You are!

Queen: Nearly two miles.

Alice: Well I shall not go, at any rate, that’s not a regular rule, you invented it just now!

King: It’s the oldest rule in the book.

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<sup>20</sup> To see the process see the following address on youtube, which he used to upload and share his experiments with the class. First he did a short called Sausage and Mash: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fAyl\\_kax5A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fAyl_kax5A) then experimented with fruits: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXMVDVUIo8o> and cake <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItwwvRYGw0> before the final creation of the Tea Party: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvfgKRE1OV0>

Alice: Then it should be number one!

King: Consider your verdict!

Queen: No! Sentence first verdict after!

Alice: Stuff and nonsense. The tarts are right there, no one stole anything!

Queen: Off with her head!

Alice: Who cares for you? You're nothing but a pack of cards!

Alice has been pulled into the technology, but she is at once co-present with the audience and projected before them before flipping the cards high into the air. The audience wavers between these two images before one camera turns to an open children's picture book of *Alice in Wonderland* and the other superimposes the cards floating down over the book. The Knave concludes the story as Alice falls asleep, ready to wake up where she started, perhaps at her computer, in front of a television, a movie, or even the banks of the shore. She has ultimately operated, controlled, manipulated, engaged with, and emerged through the technologies of this piece, and through Alice, so have the students. The student creation of these possibilities shows a shift in their initial relationship to technology. Through the lens they emerged with more confidence and embodied understanding of their relationship with and to technology.

## CONCLUSION

My understandings of this process are partially as a pedagogue: I introduced the ideas and helped the students shape and learn how to recognize what ideas to keep and how to edit. I am able to write this essay however, only also as a learner. Much of my final impressions come from the students' own writings and through what I saw them do in the process of devising. This group of particularly well-matched students (they are able to register for the module knowing who the tutor is and what the time slot is, but there is an element of chance and many of the students did not know each other) was able to introduce ideas to me I would not have thought of. They surprised me with their enthusiasm, creativity, and willingness to experiment. My experience is perhaps like that of Rancière's argument for a praxis in spectatorship:

We learn and teach, we act and know as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamt. There is no privileged medium as there is no privileged starting point. There are everywhere starting points and knot points from which we learn something new, if we dismiss firstly the presupposition of the distance, secondly the distribution of the roles, thirdly the borders between the territories. We have not to turn spectators into actors. We have to acknowledge that any spectator already is an actor of his own story and that the actor also is the spectator of the same kind of story.<sup>21</sup>

This space of the classroom, to rehearse and explore, is not in fact about knowledge, but about learning how to know. A becoming. Freire writes that: "Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis. In order to be, it must become."<sup>22</sup> The experience for the students was one in which they were able to learn how to know more about their engagement with technologies, how to tell stories through praxis, and how to grasp a set of tools with which to move forward. Peter McLaren, co-editor with Nathalia Jaramillo of *Pedagogy and Praxis in the age of Empire* writes that:

Critical pedagogy . . . helps to undress the cultural formations, social relations and institutional and other organizational structures that mediate how we approach the concepts of curriculum, design, evaluation, classroom instruction, and the social construction of knowledge, such that

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *ArtForum*. March 2007. FindArticles.com. 26 Aug. 2008. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_7\\_45/ai\\_n24354915](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_45/ai_n24354915)

<sup>22</sup> Freire, 65.

these forms and structures of mediation become more transparent in efforts to help students locate their agency so that they can act more coherently as human subjects growing up in conditions not of their own making. It does this by providing an extensive vocabulary-essentially trans-disciplinary-that brings some of the key insights from critical social theory and puts them at the service of teachers and students.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, based upon student reflections on the production in the form of a project report, they indicated a greater understanding of their own agency in working both conceptually and practically with the various technologies in each scene. My hope is that through “praxis” these students will have the embodied vocabulary to question, think and rethink and indeed, to act.

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<sup>23</sup> See: Peter McLaren Interview in <http://media.www.thehumanitiesreview.com/media/storage/paper1300/news/2008/01/16/Fall2007/Pedagogy.And.Praxis.In.The.Age.Of.Empire-3156532.shtml>

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**Student you tube videos:**

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- Orange: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXMVDVUIo8o>
- Carrot Cake: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItwwvRYGw0>
- Tea Party: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvfqKRE1OV0>