

Discussion Paper for IFTR Intermediality in Theatre and Performance Working Group

## **Doing-knowing in intermedial theatre and artistic research: CREW's *Hamlet Encounters*.**

### **PART ONE: the process of *Hamlet Encounters***

*Hamlet Encounters* is the working title of CREW's engagement with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which will emerge as a full theatre event in 2019. Work in progress has been shown in Gdansk (Aug, 2017) and KVS Brussels (May, 2018) and a version of the HDV is available to be experienced in Belgrade (July, 2018). An experimental company based in Brussels, CREW 'aims to visualize how technology is changing us'. Indeed, CREW's work historically has involved innovative exploration of media technologies (HDV, ODV, MoCap) in theatre-installation events such as *Terra Nova*.<sup>i</sup> Eric Joris, Artistic Director, is currently working with KVS associate director, Mesut Arslan, and others towards the final version, but this paper refers to the overall process of practice and research up to the Brussels iteration in May this year.

My involvement in the *Hamlet Encounters* project has been as an associate dramaturg with a practitioner-researcher background in both Shakespeare and contemporary (intermedial) theatre production. I also assisted the actors in preparing for the film and MoCap recorded scenes from *Hamlet*, even taking a small role (Barnardo) myself. I have experienced the HDV's as they have developed and the fullest yet theatre experience in Brussels. With my interests in Practice as Research (PaR), I am also documenting the project to bring out how professional creative practice might constitute research in an academic context. Accordingly, this article aims to interweave a number of perspectives. First it serves as an example of how various investigative activities in a professional practice map on to my established model for PaR.<sup>ii</sup> Bearing out my model, I have been both insider and outsider, observing how 'know how' (insider knowing) can be informed by 'know that' (outsider knowing) and transformed through critical reflection into 'know what' which makes tacit knowledge more explicit.<sup>iii</sup> In the second part particularly, the article aims also to bring out specific aspects of a conceptual framework for intermedial theatre suggesting that the disposition to inter-relationality and inter-activity of digital culture and technologies promotes a quest for doing-knowing in the experience of contemporary theatre practice.

### **'know that' – outsider perspectives**

As creative processes go, the approach to *Hamlet Encounters* has been strongly rooted in 'know that', partly because Eric Joris is himself a scholar-artist by disposition. Some PaR processes are initiated through intuitive doing, only subsequently, perhaps, realizing through critical reflection how the bodymind activity, the 'doing-knowing' is informed by 'know that'. In contrast, *Hamlet Encounters* began with a discussion over a day and a half between Eric Joris and a collection of professional academics with theatre practice backgrounds (Chiel Kattenbelt, Aneta Mancewicz, Robin Nelson, Mia Vaerman). A number of informing ideas emerged concerning: *Hamlet* as part of the Elizabethan/Jacobean 'Revenge Tradition';<sup>iv</sup> the role of astronomy and astrology in the rise of science and the shift from a medieval to a modern world view; the relativism (non-universality) of Shakespeare as understood worldwide today and the often intermedial approaches to Shakespeare in continental European production; the relevance of a performative understanding of intermediality in the

doing-knowing of theatre ‘in the here and now’, even whilst using recording technologies. To cut to the chase of a remarkably rich exchange, the following working principles emerged:

- There is a specificity to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* but no singular, ‘universal’ production or reading;
- contexts (historical, geographical, cultural) inform all productions and experiences of them (Litvin’s ‘global kaleidoscope’);<sup>v</sup>
- the engagement must be with *Hamlet* today since the experience is ‘live in the here and now’;
- amongst revenge plays in the Eliz/Jacobean ‘Revenge Tradition’, *Hamlet* is particularly distinguished by the staging of a thinking mind;
- the question of how to act honourably in a conflicted world, central to *Hamlet* in eC16, has its correlate in eC21.

### creative play as insider ‘know how’ method

In addition to the range of ‘know that’ infusing the space, practical explorations of a MoCap environment led to other insights. Trying some extracts from *Hamlet* in MoCap suits, Aneta Mancewicz and I had our captured body images projected in avatar form on a screen. Thus set up in a play space, we engaged in creative play.



As the avatars were simply downloaded from an online library they were reminiscent of Lara Croft and the Terminator and, accordingly, Aneta and I began simply to play with gender stereotypical movement.

But, as is well established, play can be a serious mode of investigation.<sup>vi</sup> The idea of swapping images occurred to us and the transformation was instantly achieved with digital technologies at the touch of a button. Predictably, we playfully inverted our actual gender behaviours. However, following our earlier discussions on cultural perspectives, the possibility of using MoCap and projection to allow participants to experience what it felt like to be in another’s bodymind seemed productive, if logistically challenging in theatre practice. This is a simple illustration of the inter-engagement of ‘know that’ and ‘know how’ but its outcome emerges in the Brussels iteration of *Hamlet Encounters* (see below) in which all

participants put on MoCap suits for a section of the piece to experience a virtual body and relocation into virtual space. Though the full force of changing cultural perspective has not yet been achieved, the potential is there.

Of course, much ‘know how’ is brought to the space by the CREW creative team: knowing how to set up cameras and rig to capture motion; knowing how to T-pose actors to co-ordinate sensors and recorders; knowing how to scan actors in costume and to dress them in post-production; knowing how 360 degree images on film might be edited with MoCap; knowing how the actors might be located in a (pre-scanned) virtual environment world.



As new technologies emerge, however, there remains here also an element of creative play. For example, the digital scan of an actual castle for the Elsinore environment was so “good” that it was too realistic to accommodate the *Hamlet* avatars and needed to be reduced to a framework. During the first trial edit of captured materials, Eric Joris remarked:

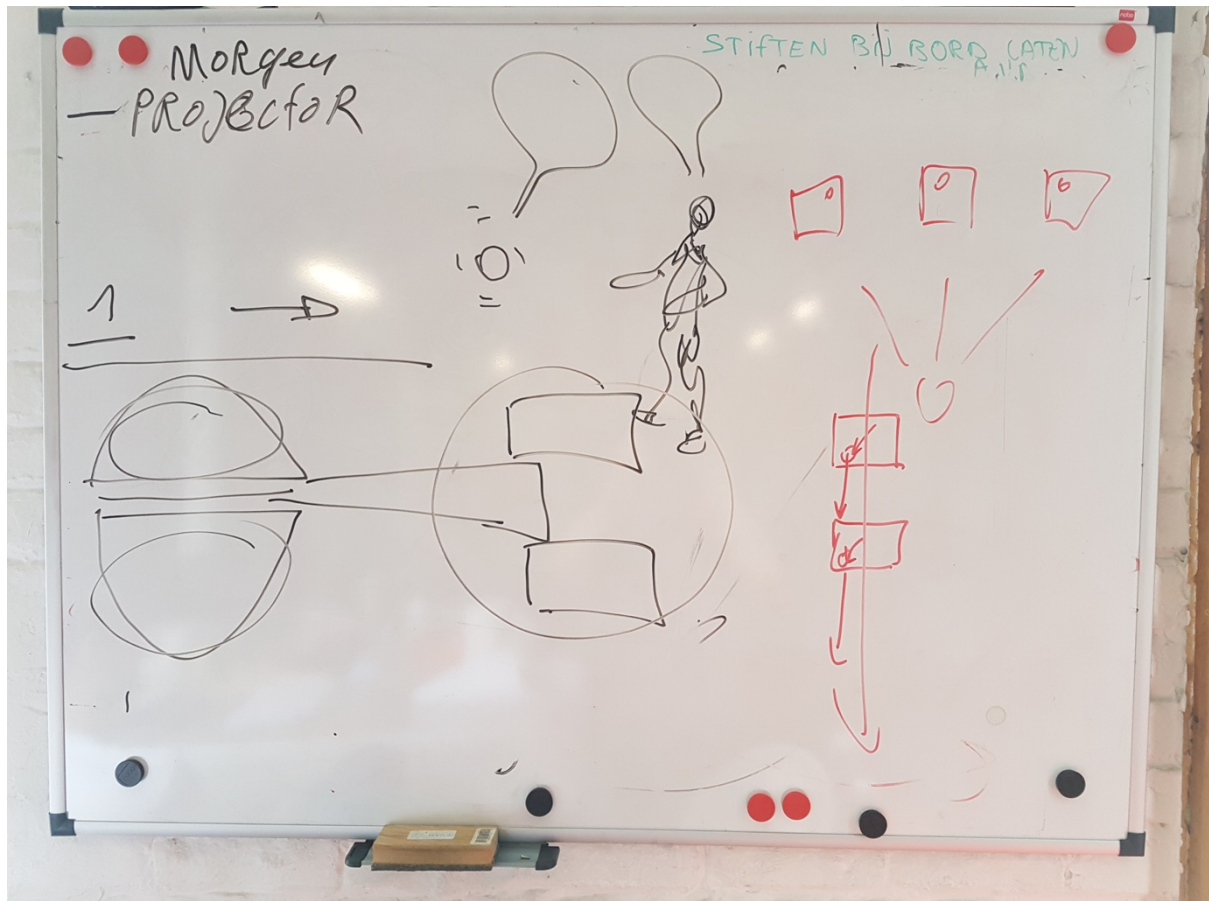
- We are progressing in an intuitive way meaning that we are before everything trying to get the results getting the attention and thrill of the audience.
- As always the medium does not work the way you expect.<sup>vii</sup>

There is inevitably an investigative element in making ‘mixed reality’ theatre with digital technologies but knowing ‘what works’ from previous projects informs the approach. Established ‘know how’ meets emerging ‘know how’ as new technologies are explored. The choice of scenes from *Hamlet* to be performed and the ultimate selection of content in the *Hamlet Encounters* project is partly determined by visual considerations of “attention and thrill” for an experience culture (see below).

### ‘know what’

The third dimension of my PaR model imbricating three modes of knowing is ‘know what’, typically achieved through critical reflection on process to make the tacit more explicit. A good example of where an attempt must be made to step outside content which has been

created in a playful, intuitive way, is the need to structure material. The abandonment of linear narrative as a structural principle in much contemporary theatre poses the problem of how to move the piece through time. Similarly, where an active or interactive element for participants is afforded to the piece by digital culture, an awareness that each participant will have a different experience is called upon. These challenges have been met in a number of ways. For example, in the work of Blast Theory, aspects of gaming (the quest, the chase) motivates participants through apparently disparate episodes.<sup>viii</sup> In *Hamlet Encounters*, after the scenes from Shakespeare's play had been captured and the scan of the castle environment achieved, the questions of structuring the material and engaging 'experiencers' arose.<sup>ix</sup> Several models were discussed and sketched - literally on a white board:

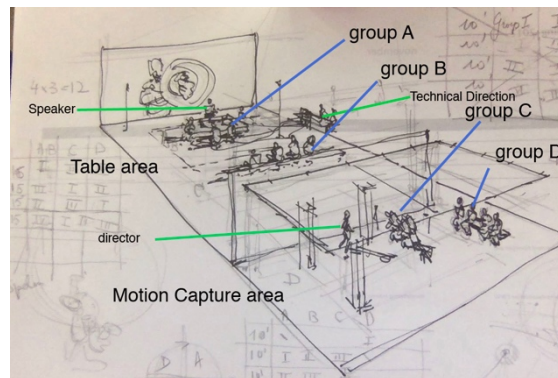


The model in red above is evidently more linear, and the one in black, which forms the basis of the current iteration involves a space sub-divided into stages through which experiencers are required to move. Before proceeding to consider the developed space, it should be noted how structuring draws upon 'know how', but primarily involves 'know what' critical reflection about what might work.

### ***Hamlet Encounters: the KSV iteration***

The latest theatre-length development of *Hamlet Encounters* involves four platforms in a studio space on which inter-linked stages of the action occur. Twelve experiencers, in four groups of three, move in circuit.





sketch © Eric Joris

At any one time, three experiencers (Group C above) in MoCap suits are directed in simple scenes from *Hamlet* observed by three more experiencers (Group D above) who, once they have put on MoCap suits, watch the live action whilst awaiting their turn at acting. They can also witness the ‘performances’ of the MoCap experiencers’ “live” avatars engaging with the actor-avatars from the pre-recorded *Hamlet* scenes projected on the big screen. Group C may in addition help to steer the *Primum Mobile*, like angels, when inserted into the Virtual Environment in the virtual castle entered at Table A. In the Table area, the three members of Group A are HDV-immersed in a virtual world where a speaker initially explores the Divine Order and medieval cosmos as relevant to *Hamlet*, the images being projected also on to the big screen for non-immersants. All this is observed by Group B, who proceed to take the places of Group A in the first of four moves in the circuit. At the end of seventy minutes, all participants will have benefited from all four encounters with *Hamlet*.

There are distinctive (possibly unique) features of the above experiment in mixed reality form. First, the participants (formerly audience) do not just interact with, but act (virtually and actually) in the piece. Their actual-virtual bodies move live through space into the virtual environment as well as being HDV-immersants in a virtual world in another section. As indicated above, the structure of the experience is at once progressive and circular but there is no linear narrative. Instead experiencers, whose sensoria are significantly disoriented in parts of the process, are also invited to step outside it to reflect upon what is happening to them. Depending upon starting-point (Group A, B, C or D) the shape of participants’ experiences will differ. Just like practitioner-researchers, however, they are both insiders and outsiders, mobilizing the equivalent mixed modes of knowing: ‘know how’, know what’ and know that’ in engaging with the rich content of the piece - the world of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* at a moment of major historical shift from the medieval to a modern world view. Overall the dislocation experienced in the piece resonates with that turbulence of the times.

### ‘location in a lineage’

In respect of academic research, artistic praxis is required to demonstrate innovation or ‘substantial new insights’ effectively shared. Such demonstration might be most effective by comparison, that is to say by locating the work in a lineage. Apart from CREW’s own previous work, *Hamlet Encounters* resonates, for example, with Rimini Protokoll’s *Best Before* and Chris Kondek’s *Dead Cat Bounce*, both of which involved participants in live engagement with a technological interface in a theatre space.<sup>x</sup> But in both these cases engagement is by proxy: in the former onscreen avatars are mobilised from participants’ seats via a hand-set; and, in the latter, participants’ ticket-money is invested live on the stock exchange with fortunes being tracked onscreen onstage. Participants do not leave their seats. Innovative and interesting though both these live ‘mixed reality’ theatre events are, neither

involves experiencers actively. Blast Theory's work, in contrast typically does involve live active engagement. *Desert Rain*, for example, sends experiencers into a virtual desert where video is projected onto a screen of water spray, rendering porous the boundary between the real and the fictional. As claimed, 'It places participants in a Collaborative Virtual Environment in which the real intrudes upon the virtual and vice versa'.<sup>xi</sup> In these respects, it comes close in its use of mixed reality to the experience of *Hamlet Encounters*. But, structurally the experience of, *Desert Rain* is linear: it is a war game giving six team players thirty minutes to 'find the target' and 'complete the mission'. It may be that here the immersion in a virtual world and sense of conclusive achievement militates against the outsider perspective and reflection afforded by the insider-outsider perspectives of *Hamlet Encounters*, though both pieces pose epistemological and ethical questions.

### **post-KVS Brussels developments**

Reflecting on the experience of the trial version of *Hamlet Encounters* at KSV, the dramaturgical team see the need for a number of developments. Primarily, there is a need for experiencers to be afforded more active engagement with the material. In the MoCap section, for example, participants were merely *uber-marionettes*. Though some *frisson*-generating moments emerged - such as the doubling of Hamlet-Ophelias - they were more available to be appreciated by the on-lookers than those in live MoCap. Similarly, in the HDV at the table, the cosmology environment was impressive and the castle environment had an eeriness with the inclusion of other figures in the shadows, but the experience felt more like watching a 3-D film, than having ones sensorium fundamentally disoriented (as it was, for example, in *Terra Nova*), or affording choices of perspective (as in the Gdansk version). These reflections have led us to revisit the specificity of different screen media and their affordances (see Chiel Kattenbelt's paper). There is a problem also with content: too much of it. The three dimensions (ethical issues derived from *Hamlet*, cosmology and the Darnley murder/revenge painting) each need more contextual explanation than there is time to give, and the need to convey information tends towards an overall passive experience of receiving information. Furthermore, this iteration seems entirely historical since at present, there is little reference to eC21 (other than the participants inhabiting it) when a key founding principle is that *Hamlet Encounters* are to be in the "here and now" of live theatre.

### **PART TWO: intermedial theatre and contemporary culture**

The second part of this article aims, as indicated, to bring out specific aspects of a conceptual framework for intermedial theatre suggesting that the disposition to inter-relationality and inter-activity of digital culture and technologies promotes a quest for doing-knowing in the experience of contemporary theatre practice.

Although inter-relations between media have a history, digital culture accelerates the tendency for inter-connections of all kinds, not just in respect of digital devices but throughout culture. As the introduction to *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* puts it:

The media forms, operational modes of devices, and cultural habits of consumers and users – not only inherently entail a relationship with an 'Other' but are structured according to a necessary interrelation with any number of 'Also-Others' (Nelson, 2010: 17).

In this broad context, the function and modes of theatre are called in question. Whilst theatre culture today sustains many authored plays, old and new, realised by actors inhabiting characters on stages and watched by audiences seated in rows in darkened auditoriums, much contemporary practice, picking up on intermedial culture, has shifted. Most established companies have turned digital in limited ways through the deployment of onscreen projections, occasional avatars, sonic scores and special effects. But some (from Forced Entertainment, through Blast Theory to Punch Drunk and DreamThinkSpeak) have more thoroughly embraced the cultural disposition to new experiences.

The pursuit of new experiences and perspectives in Western culture is not of itself new. As Robert Macfarlane has noted, its roots might be traced to the Romantic craving for wild and dangerous mountain environments to off-set the cosseted and sedentary lives of the bourgeoisie made wealthy by the fruits of the industrial revolution. Indeed, for those less actually adventurous in the mid Nineteenth Century, the experience of climbing Mont Blanc was famously shared virtually (though not by digital means of immersion) in a theatrical event, *Mont Blanc*, by Albert Smith, running from 1853 over six years to 2000 performances at the Egyptian Hall, London.<sup>xii</sup> One Hundred and Fifty years on the disposition to crave new experiences is partly an effect of a service economy in which work is pressured but less physically demanding than in a goods economy. In such a shift, the pleasures of consumption of goods having supposedly been exhausted leading to an experience economy.<sup>xiii</sup> Today super-busy, but regulated, lives concomitant with service industries have only increased demand for “experience” leisure pursuits from extreme sports to escape games. Younger audiences, particularly, crave new experiences in theatre, and *Hamlet Encounters*, though resistant to a culture of commodification, is undoubtedly part of this trajectory.

Three distinctive shifts characterize the contemporary: from representational to performative understandings of identity; from understanding of social power based on narrative or meaning to those based in operationality; from accounts of knowledge based on epistemological authority to those based on events and relationality.<sup>xiv</sup> All three foreground the fluidity and provisionality of knowing in relational process and resonances are apparent with both the theatre praxis and the approach to research related above. Although in both there are aspects which afford a spectatorship perspective inviting relatively traditional critical distance for contemplation, the aim is not to achieve a distinct answer or meaning because the inter-related insider experiential dimensions are always already in the process of dialogue (or poly-logue) to disturb any fixities temporarily settled upon. To put this another way, insider and outsider perspectives are both bodymind activities, but the latter temporarily privilege an overt cognitive process whilst the former foreground the sensorium, dislocating bearings through displacement of ‘the real’ by the virtual’, but not to the extent of complete sensory immersion.

Intermedial theatre as understood here, then, is taken to be a feature of the digital age in its emphasis on inter-related networks, fluidity and interactivity but, further, it is seen to be theatre at a time when intermediality is taken to be a disposition towards a way of being in the world. The challenge to the Cartesian individual mind making sense of the world is extended through acknowledgement of knowing as a process arising in a network environment where new inter-relations are continually in formation. There may be moments of insight, of individuation, but they are always provisional. The very form of Western theatre in which audiences seated in serried ranks in the dark watch plays authored with pre-inscribed meanings is accordingly challenged. Intermedial theatre, instead, sets up the experience of a network of inter-relations as evident in *Hamlet Encounters*. Massumi

suggests that relationality is ‘the openness of an interaction to being affected by something new in a way that qualitatively changes its dynamic nature *relationality*’ (2002: 225) original emphasis). Such is the aim of *Hamlet Encounters*: not to provide resolutions or answers but to put things in play for bodymind engagement whilst dislocating experiencers’ normative perceptual bearings - partly by downplaying the (notionally) cognitive and foregrounding the sensorium’s place in the bodymind.

When putting things in play for experiencers of intermedial theatre, there are challenges in structuring the experience such that there is sufficient immersion in, and engagement with, a new environment. Whilst it is important to afford agency, “know how” tells us that some guidance is needed to ensure the fullest experiences. From the feedback to iterations of *Hamlet Encounters* thus far, it is evident that experiencers observe rather than engage in the new environments. They tend not to move as much as they might or to explore the alternative perspectives offered (in the “bubbles” of the Gdansk iteration, for example). A task or a quest might be useful to guide engagement, ideally one which, in affording agency and a full engagement of the sensorium, also demands ethical responsibility by placing the experiencer in a position of virtual (even actual) choice.

Similarly, information needs to be provided but not so much that it cannot be handled. At present, there is almost certainly too much content. The attempt to mobilise aspects of *Hamlet* and draw parallels with the contemporary world based on the idea of parallel shifts at the turn of C17 and C21 in respect of modes of knowing the world is a major challenge. The extent to which information can be mobilized about cosmology and revenge ethics, then and now, is at issue. Further structuring and editing work remains to be done in the recognition that just sufficient information is required, to rephrase Massumi, for experiencers to be opened through an affective interaction to something new in a way that qualitatively changes its dynamic nature in inter-relational doing-knowing.

If one key function of theatre is to challenge and change perceptions, intermedial theatre has much to offer in that it invites participants into a network of activities and foregrounds relationality in experiential process rather than sense-making frames (either authorial or audience-deduced). Intermedial theatre is of today in that it is epistemologically resonant with a moment of challenge to the certainties of scientific rational knowledge. Practice as Research - emphasizing doing-knowing rather than fixed knowledge - takes on even greater significance in the context of increasing interest in process philosophy and affect (Derrida, Deleuze, Massumi). Whilst media technologies might be deployed to generate fake news and to undermine credibility, they may equally be used to bring out the complexity of experiential knowing in a shared experience. Such is the aim of *Hamlet Encounters*.

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<sup>i</sup> See clips on Vimeo/YouTube and <http://www.crewonline.org/art/projects>)

<sup>ii</sup> See Nelson, 2013

<sup>iii</sup> For a full account of my approach to PaR, see Nelson, 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> The seminal study is Bowers (1940)

<sup>v</sup> See Litvin

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, Huizinga (1995); Csikszentmihalyi (1996).

<sup>vii</sup> Eric Joris email to RN (and others) 13 July, 2017.

<sup>viii</sup> See, for example, *Uncle Roy, Can you See Me Now?*

<sup>ix</sup> The need to replace "audience" and "spectator" with this term is outlined by Nelson in Bay-Cheng *et al*, 2010: 45.

<sup>x</sup> For an account of *Dead Cat Bounce*, see Wiens in Bay-Cheng *et al*, 2010: 101-108.

<sup>xi</sup> See <https://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/desert-rain/>, accessed 30/04/18.

<sup>xii</sup> See Macfarlane, 2003, 88-89, 163-4.

<sup>xiii</sup> For accounts of the postmodern or experience economy, see

<sup>xiv</sup> See Mackenzie (2003). 'Operationality' signifies a change by altering relations in a network.