Zoom Fever: Mapping Small Theatre Ecosystems Using Digital Archives

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INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the idea of 'scalable reading' in digital archives of theatre, and how the concept is being applied to the digital archive of Splinters Theatre of Spectacle to reconnect the intangibles of past performance to the cultural landscape in which it was performed. Linking the small digital archive of the company to large datasets such as AusStage and using software platforms such as Google Earth allows users to 'zoom' between the frames of reference of the connected databases and can be used to evocate a sense of place that can enhance the understanding of the material in the archive.

I first saw Splinters in 1990 while working at Sydney's Performance Space in its original Cleveland Street location and joined Splinters as manager and performer between 1992-1994. Since 2010, I have been developing a digital archive of this significant experimental (latterly often termed postdramatic) theatre group based in Canberra, which is both Australia's national capital and also a small city on the fringe of the cultural hub of Sydney. The company included several graduates of the Canberra School of Art and developed a trademark haunting, grungy cartoon style for its posters when the street poster was king and formed a significant part of any urban landscape.

Over its thirteen-year career, Splinters produced a prodigious amount of documentary video and photography, posters, flyers and other ephemera, now collected in the ACT Heritage Library as part of the David Branson Papers (HMSS 0223), after the group's late co-founder. The Splinters video collection, which totals some 123 tapes, has been digitised with the aid of a heritage grant from the ACT Government.

The overarching aim of the research has been to develop a framework and streamlined methodology for theatre groups and individual artists to create online digital archives of their performance documentation using free and open-source software. Many Australian experimental performance groups are not well represented in institutional collections, nor do they have the resources to manage historical holdings of videotape and other objects on top of ever-increasing amounts of data. Facilitating the creation and linking of an array of small digital archives offers the prospect of bringing them to broader attention and ongoing engagement from audience members, practitioners, and researchers. Such engagement could help to better understand how recent subcultural production can be preserved and sustained.



FIGURE 1: Poster for *Whirled on a Fatal Floor*, by Andy Miller and Stuart Vaskess, Screenprint on A2 paper (ACT Heritage Library).

There is a growing body of evidence to support widespread anecdotal appreciation that the cultural and sub-cultural life of Canberra in the 1980s and 1990s was both extraordinarily productive and of wide and ongoing influence, which

shows clearly that Canberra's contemporary cultural landscape cannot be understood without fuller acknowledgment of such recently created heritage.[1] The cultural landscape is a product of community history; shared experiences are the background for artistic creation by a subversive collective like the Splinters. It is challenging, as I have found in my research, to get much traction or interest in small datasets and collections from significant experimental theatre and performance groups from the major collecting institutions. This remains a worrying gap in Australia's cultural collections.

Consider John Schofield and Luise Rellensmann's *Underground Heritage: Berlin Techno and the Changing City* (2016), which explores the interaction of that cutting-edge scene, which began in the 1980s, with the remains of the city's pre-war architecture. They assert that 'this "underground" heritage is essential to social and cultural sustainability', providing a basis upon which Berlin's contemporary identity now thrives in 'its capacity to attract and sustain alternative lifestyles'.[2] Schofield elsewhere argues the need to provide 'a relevant contemporary context within which to closely and critically examine aspects of a "historic environment" many consider too recent or too marginal to fall within conventional definitions of heritage'.[3] Digital humanities techniques have considerable untapped potential to shed light on such recent heritage creation.

SCALABLE READING

In *Local Reading, Distant Archive: Performance Space at Cleveland Street and Carriage Works* (2020), Caroline Wake and Boni Cairncross make interesting observations about the idea of scalable reading of digital archives of performance. The essay is an account of their work on Performance Space, an institution founded in 1983 that remains the hub for experimental, postdramatic theatre and performance in Australia. As a part of their work, Wake and Cairncross worked to complete the record of performances and artists at the performance space in AusStage, the national performing arts database. Founded in 2001, AusStage has gained international recognition as a leading digital humanities project – one of a growing, but still small, number in the

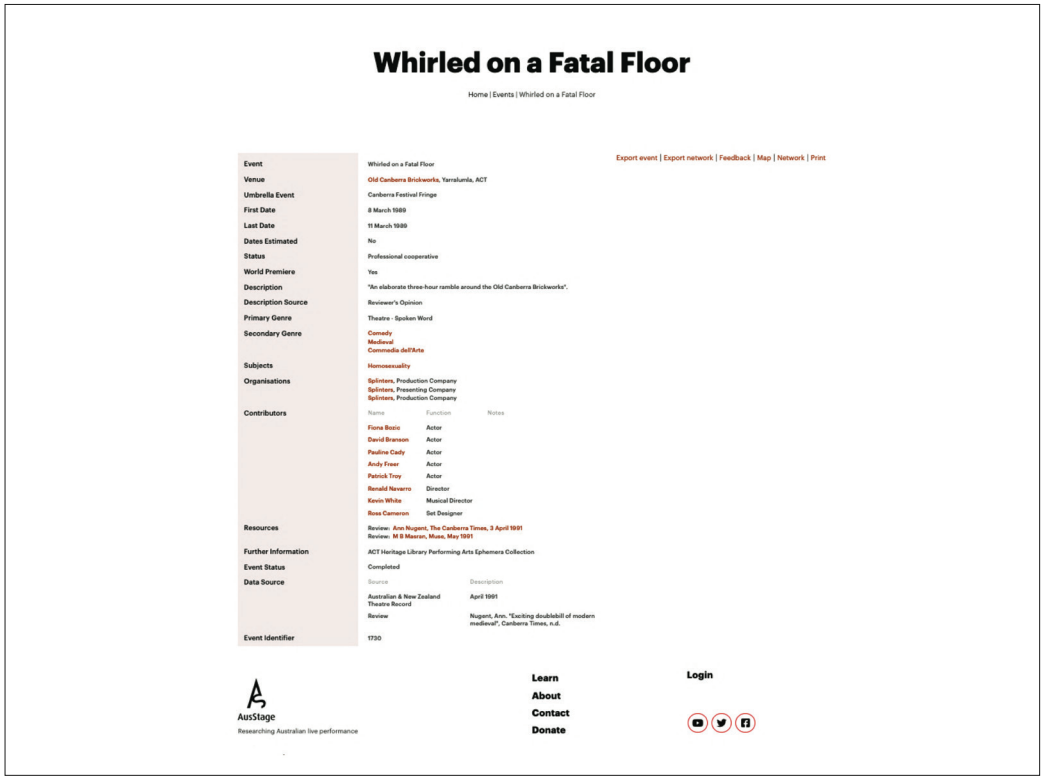


FIGURE 2: AusStage Event page for *Whirled on a Fatal Floor*.

field of theatre and performance studies. An effect of AusStage's success is that it has deservedly become a kind of default layer for digital scholarship of Australian theatre.[4]

Wake and Cairncross look to Martin Meuller's concept of 'scalable reading' as a way of thinking about the Performance Space database of 1,400 entries (which they call 'medium-sized'), as a framework to join up the work of close reading of Performance Space events that they and other scholars have undertaken. Mueller describes 'zooming' in and out from the data, noting that, 'Often it is a detail seen from afar that inspires a closer look'.[5]

Mueller frames this idea as a 'shuttling between text and context'.[6] He gives the example of thinking about the work of Homer as the result of a collision between two technologies, the existing one of speech and the newer one of writing. Such collisions occurred several times for theatre in the twentieth

century. Two of these – the availability of the portable video camera from the mid 1980s, and then the advent of digital media disseminated on the web from around 2010 – are particularly interesting and challenging in terms of their relationship to ephemeral performance.

EXAMPLE – WORKING WITH GOOGLE EARTH

To explore this concept of scalable reading using the Splinters data, I have been experimenting with Google Earth, where we can move between sites and levels of zoom, starting from the overview of Canberra. The general concept is, of course, nothing new, and there are many excellent 'story map' tools available, but Google has the great advantage of being constantly under development, adding new features, and has the massive potential audience reach of a software giant.

The first step is to use Google Earth's in-built features to create a Project. In Projects you can create or import Keyhole Markup Language (KML) files, a Google owned but widely used standard geographic information format in mapping software. Importantly, AusStage can export KML files. In this instance, I manually dropped pins and created entries for all the Splinters's performance locations in Canberra. I could have imported a file at this point, but in working with a landscape mapped this way, it seemed appropriate to go manually to explore and check the mappings and views myself, based on my own knowledge of the sites. Then it's easy to import a KML from a database such as AusStage, which includes such geographic data. Once this is done, a nice feature of Google Earth is the 3D 'flyover' view, where Google pulls back up into the air and flies to the next site in the Project.

THE PROMISE AND PROBLEMS OF METADATA

Postdramatic theatre such as Splinters presents additional challenges in terms of the types of data that can be collected. As the term suggests, postdramatic theatre often eschews many aspects of drama including the playscript, narrative and character representations. It can be non-verbal or non-text-based and is often site-specific. It also seeks to explore the relationship between



FIGURE 3: Google Earth 3D view of Canberra Brickworks – note the black pin for *Whirled on A Fatal Floor* bottom right.

performers, audience and site, often breaking the 'fourth wall' of theatre or moving the audience around.[7]

In the absence of the playscript, which is the primary basis of the dramatic work, distant reading of a limited database of a small body of postdramatic theatre work can struggle to give much information to the user about the content of the work. My research has concentrated primarily on the use of documentary video, which was swiftly adopted by the cutting-edge practitioners with the advent of portable video cameras from the mid-1980s.

Data ontologies that form that basis of an archive's structure need to be able to describe the entities and their relationships in the domain they represent. Therefore, a data ontology for postdramatic theatre archives must be equipped to encompass both conceptual and material relationships between the performance, the audience and the place. To organise the archive's data, I have developed an artistically driven *theatre ecosystem* ontology inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage, as further developed by Miguel DeLanda and applied to theatre by David Worrall.[8] The approach seeks to map the events, places and flows of the ecosystem/assemblage of cultural production onto the cultural landscape in which it was created and which sustains it.

MOVING BETWEEN FRAMES

In her keynote to the *Small Data is Beautiful* symposium that gave rise to this book, Katherine Bode highlighted pertinent issues, notably that looking to zoom between close and distant reading risks falling into the trap of seeking a 'generalised, representational space' in trying to be all things to all people. She cites Anna Tsing's observation that all attempts at 'scaling up' natural phenomena have to always battle with the non-scalable elements they contain, that 'the ability to make one's research framework apply to greater scales without budging the frame is only possible when the research framework parses stable data elements.'[9] To avoid this trap, my strategy is to follow the approach of former AusStage lead researcher, Jonathan Bollen, and start with the most stable data point, the physical location of the performance event, and work from there.[10]

Once we have a collection of stable points, we can begin to explore the unstable and intangible things that are attached to them. As Glenn D'Cruz has noted, the non-narrative nature of postdramatic theatre can often make the spectators' memory of the performance events unreliable. Upon viewing a video recording some twenty years later, he found that his own memories of what he regarded as a most profound experience were notably astray.[11] This brought me to the position that for work like Splinters's – which is fundamentally unrepeatable, without any published scripts, and often varied greatly between performances in a season – there was great value in reconnecting these recordings with the audiences that experienced the performances. My approach instead overlays the documentary video and images with the site of the performance.

Working with video as data, however, includes a kind of paradox. The small set of data points used to describe a video is the entry to an immense amount of data contained in the video stream, which is not readable in the same way as text. Video is like a 'data iceberg', the decoded visible part looks beautiful but beneath the surface of each video is a colossal amount of data that can be difficult to wrangle. Projects such as the Circus Oz Living Archive and the massive European ECLAP video project have had explored techniques such as folksonomy and tagging as a point of entry.[12]



FIGURE 4: Zoomed in view, showing Splinters video uploaded to the Project.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SITE

The Old Canberra Brickworks was the site for *Whirled on a Fatal Floor* produced in 1989. The production was a landmark: Splinters coalesced as a large collective in Canberra when the core founding members returned after several years of touring to Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne. It was the first major articulation of the spectacular and site-specific promenade performance style which Splinters termed 'Crowd Theory'. The audience was split into three groups, and each had a very different experience moving through the site. Splinters's co-founder Patrick Troy describes it thus:

> This Crowd Theory was a name used for the process of moving the audience through spaces, of asking them to crawl through tunnels, look through slits, wear headsets, ride on ferries, etc. This interest originated, for Splinters, when in the first venue an audience observing one scene in front was then turned around for the next scene behind. It created an interesting tension between the audience and the performers.[13]

The Brickworks was, as the name suggests, the site where the characteristic red bricks seen in houses all over inner Canberra were quarried and made. It is



FIGURE 5: Google Earth aerial view showing a photograph uploaded by a user, and link to Wikipedia entry.

an important cultural heritage site, but one beset by controversy. Built in 1916, it produced some 600 million bricks before it was decommissioned in 1976. The site was sold to a private developer, who opened it up for antique furniture restoration and sales. Splinters established its workshop there from 1989 until 1996, along with a number of visual artists who set up studios, later joined by a successful recycled timber business.

The developer was seriously injured in a fall at the site, which led to it being resumed by the Commonwealth. Since then, the site has been locked in development purgatory as various proposals have been floated to redevelop it. Ultimately the artists and timber workers were forced out in 2015. The site remains highly contested and, as a result, still undeveloped, empty and thus comprehensively trashed by vandals. It's saddening but unsurprising to read in reports that heritage specialists do not recognise its more recent usage as a site for artists and crafts for some 30 years, treating this as little more than a footnote and focusing only on its original purpose.[14] The disconnect between subcultural activity (and its small data) and official heritage with its massive archives could not be more evident.

By connecting the small data of groups like Splinters to the larger corpus, there is a prospect that this recent history will be acknowledged. This in

part relies on raising public awareness through making the material available online and connecting the past events to contemporary understanding of the sites. Returning to our project, the attraction of Google is obvious from its ubiquity, enabling a crowdsourced counter to the official narrative. Each Splinters performance site already has a Google map address and zooming in, as shown, brings up photos that other users have added or if not, a street map. The features of the site that are photographed and uploaded by random Google users provide an insight into vernacular understandings of the site.

Clicking on the blue *Whirled on a Fatal Floor* pin brings up the material I have added to the Project, such as the production poster shown on the right in Figure 6, which can also include videos.

The red [X] in Figure 6 shows the AusStage data. Clicking on it brings up a window showing the linked AusStage entry. Clicking on this window will bring up a new window with the AusStage page itself. Viewers can then click through the performers, or other features of AusStage, to find out more.

By zooming back out from the map, we can bring into view the whole of Splinters's output mapped by red AusStage [X]s and can explore and zoom back down in the same way to open up the Event record for each production.

The resulting map will be embedded in the online Splinters Interactive Theatre Archive, created using the Omeka S content management platform, which I plan to publish by the end of 2024. Omeka S is a museum grade online collections management system that is specifically designed to facilitate linking small data collections to other platforms through the use of standard ontologies such as Dublin Core.

CONCLUSION

This brief excursion has, I hope, shown that the digital archive of the work of Splinters, especially its numerous site-specific performances, will be enhanced by connecting this small dataset to the context in which it was made. As part of Canberra's cultural landscape, it begins to show the feedback loop that underpins the ecosystem concept—an assemblage of living ongoing



FIGURE 6: Zoomed in view, showing Splinters digital archive object uploaded to the Project.

interactions between the company members and its audiences and the spaces in which it performed, embedded in the wider cultural landscape. It recognises shared experiences as the background for artistic creation by an underground collective such as Splinters, embedded in and overlaying meaning to the tangible built and natural heritage. The experiment shown here is one way of moving between the different frames of reference enabled by software tools and applying the lenses of other disciplines to highlight the features of the small data in the broader cultural ecosystem.

As noted above, what I have done here is not especially novel in terms of the technology: it's about finding practical applications for small datasets of underground groups and theatre artists and betting on the longevity of free and open-source software platforms. It is a way of joining these little, beautiful icebergs in the ever-growing oceans of data. Fixing some landmarks and building a few lighthouses to guide intrepid travellers into the stormy and little-charted seas of late-twentieth-century Australian theatre experimentalism. Yet, for me, the great promise of the digital humanities has always been the promise of being able to use data to glean insights into the intentional effects a body of artistic work has on a community over time, what Baz Kershaw calls the 'efficacy of radical theatre'.[15]

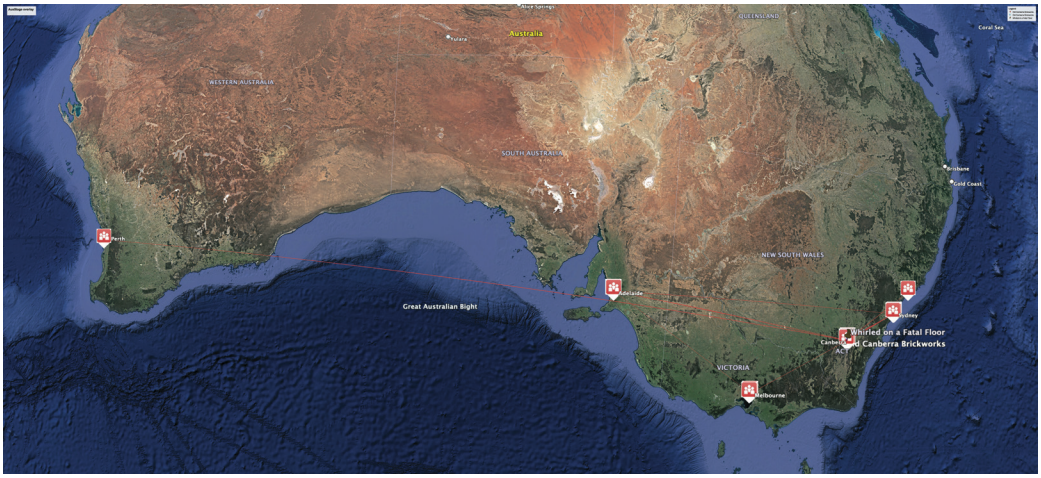


FIGURE 7: Australia-wide network of Splinters AusStage entries.

From this kind of exploration, the following frames of reference can be navigated:

- The Aggregation level: the landmarks are easily findable and searchable through AusStage, Trove, Google Earth.
- The Macro level: shows flows and patterns – creating and overlaying KML data that link to the above and enable us to zoom to other images and histories.
- The Event/Object database level: we can then zoom in to look at a single Event instance and all its related objects and people.
- The Micro or Data level: in this final stage we tunnel down into the video and see/read/analyse non-text-based content.

Making a database from a creative work, as Mueller suggests, leads us to consider the abstract relationships between the data and the properties of the objects they describe. In the case of recordings of performance events, these relationships help us to analyse the complex data inherent in artistic works themselves. As Bode and Tsing point out, great challenges remain in terms of joining up databases based on differing ontologies but ways of joining them up more readily are being made. We can also, as humanists, use artistic approaches to bridging some of these conceptual gaps.

As former Splinters member Louise Morris puts it, the tangible and intangible are linked through site specificity and mediated through bodies. In this practice, performances are 'particular acts of attention that invite visitors to look outwards rather than inwards: from the body to the site, and from the site to the culture, context and history'.[16] The advent of ubiquitous personal computing technology that has forced a rethinking of the relationship between the live performance event and mediated experiences can be used to explore the experience of such past events by reactivating their own embodied memories and perhaps adding something to the archive in the form of a comment.

I hope that by showing some new ways this kind of data can be used at the local level and dealing with some of the technical challenges in managing it and making it accessible, this kind of approach can be attractive and useful to theatre researchers, students and audiences. In this way, we can ensure that the beautiful small data of local and underground cultural production is sustained to add to the stories and heritage that our communities make and help to guide the management of the cultural landscape.

Endnotes

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[10] Bollen, 'Data Models for the Theatre Research'.

[11] Glenn D'Cruz, 'The Man Who Mistook Marat for Sade: "Living" Memory and the Video Archive,' *Australasian Drama Studies* 64 (2014): 155–76.

[12] Pierfrancesco Bellini and Paolo Nesi, 'A Linked Open Data Service for Performing Arts,' in *Information Technologies for Performing Arts, Media Access, and Entertainment*, ed. Paolo Nesi and Raffaella Santucci, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 13–25, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-40050-6_2; David Carlin and Laurene Vaughan, *Performing Digital* (Taylor & Francis EBooks, 2015), http://www.tandfebooks.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/doi/book/10.4324/9781315599960.

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