Devising Place and Social History: A Regional Perspective on Teaching Devised Performance in the Tertiary Sector

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New performance-making practices are so central to contemporary theatre production globally that a course on devised performance is an obvious critical and practical learning experience to offer students of Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies in the higher education sector. I use the term ‘devised performance’ here to indicate a new performance work for which there was no pre-existing play text or performance score. Within the limited timeframe of an undergraduate course, however, it is simply not possible to teach the many different categories of devised performance that are prevalent in contemporary Western theatre practice; this is particularly true for courses that maintain a focus on practical exploration and collaborative outcomes. Autobiographical performance, site-specific performance, time-based performance, verbatim drama, documentary theatre and site-responsive performance are just a few of the genre categories currently applied within the eclectic field of contemporary performance-making. When one reflects on the fact that there is no singular or overriding process of creative experimentation that can stand in for the wide variety of strategies employed by contemporary devisers, the prospect of teaching a course on devising performance can initially appear problematic. The obvious solution is for the tertiary teacher to choose which sorts of performance-making processes and outcomes will suit their specific teaching environment and their available resources. This article discusses the pedagogical strategies currently employed for teaching collaborative performance-making within the School of Drama, Fine Art and Music at the University of Newcastle.

Histories of devised performance reveal that the workers’ theatre movements of the 1920s and 1930s, the counter-cultural and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the community theatre movement that emerged in the 1970s, all derived thematic and scenic material from a prolonged engagement on the part of practitioners with a discrete set of social, political and/or aesthetic concerns. By the 1990s, Alison Oddey has observed that “the term “devising” had less radical implications, placing greater emphasis on skill sharing, specific roles, increasing division of responsibilities, and more hierarchical group structures”. So while we can...
say that contemporary devising practice is no longer tied, necessarily, to political activism or driven by the imperative to raise consciousness about this issue or that, it is a truism that devised performance arises from the need or desire, on the part of the practitioner/s, to explore some theme or other and then to share the creative outcomes with an audience. When contemporary performance-makers undertake their research, select and workshop their material, reflect upon their processes, rehearse and eventually perform their new work, they have been pursuing a theme or an enquiry of some kind. These process stages are particularly implicated if the new performance work is generated from documents, testimony, archival research, or all three – as is the case with projects generated within the course under discussion here.

Here then is the next decision for the tertiary teacher leading a course in devising performance: what will the devised works be about? The course upon which this article focuses asks students to engage with the history of the place in which they are studying and living: Newcastle. The city is the second-oldest white settlement in Australia and the region has a rich Indigenous history; local repositories contain readily available source materials concerning both histories of inhabitation. The choice to make local history the broad theme of investigation in turn opens up the opportunity to use creative processes associated specifically with documentary theatre, autobiographical performance and verbatim performance. A reliance on local history source materials also leads, quite logically, to the possibility of creating site-specific performances and the opportunity for students to experience what Nick Kaye has described as the exchanges that occur ‘between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined’.6

The following exposition explains the delivery and outcomes of our course in devising performance, delivered at first-year level within the Introduction to Drama strand. Constructed upon a delicate balance of theory, practice, student-driven research and a rich repository of community resources, it is underpinned with the rationale that it is through processes germane to collaborative devising that students can – and do – engage with matters of place, history – unofficial and official – and social history.

The pedagogical journey
Throughout the first nine weeks of a thirteen-week semester, a variety of production case studies are provided as core readings. By means of these examples of contemporary devising practice, students are introduced to the prevalent terminologies of the field – such as ‘site-specific performance’, ‘autobiographical performance’, ‘verbatim theatre’ and ‘documentary theatre’ – and to the dramaturgical attributes that give rise to these taxonomies of contemporary performance-making. Class discussions tease out the various political, social and aesthetic contexts that engendered the works in question and examine the collaborative processes germane to the praxis of each group or individual who produced the performances.
Currently, the course maintains a focus on several broad categories of production: on performances that engage with place and memory and on the range of creative production indicated by the terms ‘documentary’ and ‘verbatim theatre’.

The case studies that anchor our investigations into place and memory include Graeme Miller’s *Linked*, an urban installation work commissioned in 2003 by the Museum of London. Through this work, Miller bears testimony to a whole neighbourhood in East London (his own) that was destroyed to make way for the construction of the M11 link road, in the 1990s. A map and a headset with an inbuilt receiver are essential for participants who walk the four miles of the link road which Miller has lined with twenty transmitters broadcasting ‘a haunting mixture of music, ambient sounds, and personal memories of those who once lived in the now vanished streets’. Through this work, Miller bears testimony to a whole neighbourhood in East London (his own) that was destroyed to make way for the construction of the M11 link road, in the 1990s. A map and a headset with an inbuilt receiver are essential for participants who walk the four miles of the link road which Miller has lined with twenty transmitters broadcasting ‘a haunting mixture of music, ambient sounds, and personal memories of those who once lived in the now vanished streets’.  

The notion of walking through a landscape resonant with personal stories from the past – and inevitably informed by one’s present experience – is also a feature of Mike Pearson’s walking performances, *The First Five Miles* (1998) and *Bubbling Tom* (2000). Critical and descriptive analyses of Pearson’s work are readily accessible in books written by himself and by others. There is similarly a growing body of literature that reflects upon walking performances and that could, therefore, be included in the course readings as well: performances such as Carl Lavery’s *Mourning Walk* (c. 2003), Phil Smith’s *The Crab Walks* (2004) and *Crab Steps Aside* (2005) or Mark Minchinton’s *Void: Kellerberrin Walking* (2004).

Another case study on an engagement with place is Deborah Warner’s *The Angel Project* (1999–2003). Originally produced for the London International Festival of Theatre in 1999, Warner’s multi-installation work was re-staged across thirteen sites for the Perth International Festival of the Arts in 2000 and again in 2003 for the Lincoln Centre Festival in New York. ‘Audience’ participants in *The Angel Project* undertook a solitary journey, with a guidebook, to many internal and external spaces in the urban landscape which Warner manipulated to suggest a recent angelic presence. In the early weeks of the course, students are also introduced to the site-responsive productions of British group dreamthinkspeak. This company’s installed performances encourage its spectators to take a journey through modelled landscapes and architectural environments in which their dramaturgy uses live performers, moving and still image, and soundscapes.

Within the section of the course that engages with documentary and verbatim theatre, the local content of our teaching sources increases a little, thanks mostly to the critical essays generated in recent years about the Sydney-based performance group, Version 1.0. This company’s production of edited, multi-camera recordings of its shows – packaged with accompanying scripts and notes – facilitates their inclusion as case studies in an undergraduate course. In addition, essays by Derek Paget which explain
documentary and verbatim techniques as the genesis of creative production, recent discussions by British playwrights who use verbatim sources in their writing, and critical accounts of the working methods that generated Theatre Workshop’s *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963) round out the current collection of case studies and readings upon which students are required to reflect in class discussions.

Weekly tutorials are the place where the all-important groundwork for eventual group collaboration is laid down through an incremental programme of practical exercises. If collaborative devising is a language that is called into being and shared by its creators, then learning to devise necessitates the creation of a new way of communicating. In the same way that any spoken language has a morphology of structure, with building blocks such as syntax, phrases, clauses and sentences, so learning to devise in a group with others necessitates the development, over time, of a shared working language. Approximately two-thirds of each three-hour class is given over to practical devising exercises that build from week to week in complexity and thus duration. It is through this work, undertaken in groups of five or six students each, that the capacity for creative autonomy is encouraged and working relationships are set in motion. Beginning with a different set of creative stimuli each week, the students are given the parameters for their devising exercise; after working on it, they return later in the tutorial to show their piece to the rest of the group and receive critical feedback from peers and tutors. The final hour of each tutorial is given over to discussion of the readings assigned in the preceding week.

In conjunction with the weekly three-hour tutorials, a lecture series also runs over the first nine weeks of semester, both to augment the foundational readings of the course and to contextualise the practical work of tutorials. Lectures cover topics such as the emergence of devised performance in the early twentieth century and its historical relationship to political activism and consciousness-raising; the mobilisation of autobiographical material as the primary source for new performance works; and the ethical concerns implicated in devising strategies that emerge from the use of personal testimony, interviews and documents of various kinds. The lecture time-slot further provides a forum for engagement with local historians and with theatre practitioners who are invited to speak to the hard-to-categorise processes, whether group-based or personal, that provide the foundation for their own creative praxis.

Over the three years that I have taught this course, I have observed that the case studies with which students most readily engage are Pearson’s solo walking performance, *Bubbling Tom*, Miller’s *Linked*, and Warner’s *The Angel Project*. Upon reading about *Linked*, students reflect, for example, that they could devise a guided tour of parts of Newcastle’s heritage precinct. This is a locale that includes Newcastle East’s picturesque streets of terrace
houses, a foreshore park where converted railway sheds now provide a sheltered spot for barbecues and group get-togethers, the site of the first coal mine in the southern hemisphere, several beaches – including Nobby’s surf beach where the bulk carrier MV *Pasha Bulker* ran aground in a storm in June 2007 – and a convict-built breakwater that joins a rocky outcrop with a lighthouse on the top which was once an island – also called Nobby’s. Students have projected that the participants on such a tour could be provided with a map and a headset attached to a portable audio-player, similar to the self-guided headset units available in art galleries. Preferring not to create a guided tour of sites now memorialised by the city’s recent heritage makeover, students have proposed that personal narratives could be gathered from people who use, or have used, Newcastle’s beaches either for surfing, swimming, dog-walking, family outings, wedding photos, sexual encounters, obtaining illicit drugs, or the myriad other social occasions and memories through which people of the area relate to this locale. These narratives of inhabitation might be recorded and made available on the portable audio-players with headsets. While no students have actually realised this particular project *in situ*, fragments of such proposals have been written into scripts and performances devised within the course. Walking performances have also been created, but more of this later.

Warner’s appropriation of disused buildings in her New York setting for *The Angel Project* has led students to reflect upon the clapped-out buildings that line the western stretch of Newcastle’s long Hunter Street. The derelict buildings and dilapidated shopfronts testify to a movement of decentralisation in the city’s past, to the rise of the suburban shopping centre, and to a set of circumstances particular to this post-industrial city where a makeover is underway by developers and the city council but urban transformation is slow. One student project, conceived in response to this abandoned stretch of main street, resulted in a simple but effective installation in the Drama Studio on campus. Within the shadowy, empty studio, a laptop sat on a small table, lit from above. Playing on the laptop was an endless film of the rickety escalator in the Co-operative Society Building that is no longer the community hub it once was. The relentless revolutions of the empty escalator, denied its original purpose because the building attracts few customers, provided the soundtrack. Around the black-curtained perimeter and littered on the studio floor were masses of photographs taken from inside the Co-op Building; through their photos, the students aimed to capture the sensations of hollowness and absence that they experienced when they first discovered it. Also scattered around the studio were small pages of writing transcribed from the group’s collective research into the origins of the Co-operative Society and its historical significance to the Newcastle community. ‘Audience’ was admitted in groups of three and there were never more than three people in the studio at once. As they took time to look at the photos and to piece together – from the fragments of
writing – the purpose of the Co-operative Society and the role it once played in the daily functioning of the local community, audience members were in the mediatised presence of the empty escalator that now rumbles away at the centre of the dead building.

Students find *Linked* and *The Angel Project* remarkable both for their physical scale – the M11 link road is four miles long while *The Angel Project* played over nine different sites in New York city – and for the duration of time that spectator-participants take to pass through each work: up to six hours for *Linked* and up to twelve for *The Angel Project*. By contrast, Pearson’s *Bubbling Tom* is surprising for its intimacy of scale. Commissioned as part of a creative scheme entitled Small Acts at the Millennium, Pearson’s performance was a personal milestone, in that the year 2000 marked the millennium and his becoming fifty years of age. The guided tour and walking performance was situated in Hibaldstow, a village in the east of England where Pearson spent the first eight years of his childhood. He explains that he wanted ‘to create a site-work at my place of origin. Here, “on my own doorstep” and “in my own backyard”, I would make a piece with, and concerning, the micro-landscape of my childhood, walking “as if” in the couple of years either side of 1955. Performing for an audience that included extended family and their neighbours, his primary school teacher, his ‘school-friend Tony, various local inhabitants, and visitors from Sheffield and London’, the scripted work drew on interviews – ‘relating to particular events’ – photographs – ‘of me in this place’ – and the memories of himself and others – ‘particularly non-family members’. Over two hours, Pearson and his intimate audience visited ten locations in the village that were significant to his memories of the place. Despite having learned a lengthy script, he notes that at times he could ‘barely get a word in edgeways’ as he was ‘constantly interrupted by others with additions to, and corrections and contradictions of, my story’.

Central to Pearson’s work is the Welsh notion of personal place, ‘*y filltir sgwar*’, which he explains as ‘the square mile of childhood, the intimate landscape of our earliest years, that terrain we know in the close-up, in detail, in a detail we will never know anywhere again’. This concept is used to activate a cluster of practical devising exercises in our course – exercises which begin with notions of place and memory and the relationship of the present-day self to the places and memories of the past. Students are asked to draw a detailed map of their own ‘square mile’, the place that they know best in their memory. For many, this will be a childhood place, while for older students a place, and time, of great change in their lives is often chosen. Eventually the ‘square mile’ maps are activated in the teaching studio as each student imaginatively creates a geography and then moves through it physically, re-creating in their bodies the conditions of their being in that place when they inhabited it in the past. They are then asked to write about the place that they have chosen, and their being in this place, in any writing
style they choose. A week later, the texts are spoken by the writer in class – not in any sense ‘acted’ or embellished; the conditions of this autobiographical speaking, and witnessing, are kept as open and unobstructed as possible.

I have observed that this process usually marks a turning point in the dynamics of the class group. The request first to mobilise memories and then to share them in a class – where the participants are as yet not well known to one another – is proposed, by the tutor, as if it is the simplest thing in the world, but it is nevertheless a process that is predicated upon trust and respect. The ‘square mile’ narratives are then thrown open to group devising and the personal stories of place, friends, neighbours and family return as small performances, now shared by the narrator and a wider circle of collaborators. I have also discovered that this cluster of devising exercises engenders a deeper appreciation by students of the dramatic potential of direct address – so frequently a dramaturgical element of verbatim theatre, documentary theatre and performances that emerge from autobiographical material.

Local history sources
An engagement with local history supports the devising projects that are undertaken throughout the latter part of the course. In addition to the case-study readings and the practical class exercises, students are provided with documents relating to the history of Newcastle since the time of white settlement, and stories that belong to the Indigenous people of the region. The Awabakal people are the traditional owners of the land where Newcastle is situated; white settlement of this land dates from 1801. Transcriptions of the 1801 journals kept by Lieutenant-Colonel William Peterson and Lieutenant James Grant, who were sent by Governor King to survey the Coal River, later named the Hunter River, are among the documents provided. Besides these, an environmental history of the Hunter River, accounts of the night a Japanese submarine shelled Newcastle East in 1942, a history of brass bands in the region, documents concerning the makeshift camps for unemployed people that sprung up during the Great Depression – which persisted into the 1960s – and contemporary activist websites are among the second wave of course readings. Paintings by the convict artist Joseph Lycett (1775–1828) are also introduced as documentary evidence of early nineteenth-century habitation in the area. Lycett’s watercolour views of the nascent town show the topography of the land surrounding the mouth of the Hunter River in the years shortly after the establishment of the early penal colony. Although changed by industry and human habitation, the geographic features are unmistakable to anyone with even a brief association with the city. Lycett’s paintings of ‘Aborigines resting by campfire, near the mouth of the Hunter River, Newcastle, NSW’ and of ‘Aborigines cooking and eating beached whales, Newcastle, NSW’ frequently evoke surprise from students.
who admit to never having considered that the region was occupied – and still is – by Indigenous people. These documents are intended, however, as the starting point rather than the terminus for the local history research that will eventually provide the source material for the devising projects. Local libraries, the Newcastle City Council website, local activist sites, and online resources available from the Coal River Working Party constitute a considerable repository of readily available documentary support.28

For some students, the challenge to use documents and verbatim testimony as primary source material for their devising ventures leads them not to the past, but to their present. Alcohol-fuelled violence on weekends in Newcastle’s inner city led to new laws in 2007 which have imposed a 1 a.m. curfew and a 3 a.m. lockout, applied on Friday and Saturday evenings to all fifteen pubs that currently trade in the inner city. The new laws have impacted upon various sectors of the community and are the source of continuing vigorous debate between police, licensees, local residents, patrons and the city council. Interviews with police, patrons, taxi-drivers, members of the residents’ action group, and liquor sales staff, have provided grist for student-devised projects that have sought to give voice to the multiple sides of this issue. For others, the city’s history of homelessness has provided their research focus. Homeless camps dotted the Newcastle region from the 1930s through to the 1960s and stories of these camps have become part of the city’s official history. A number of projects have sought to integrate the students’ autobiographical, and therefore unofficial, experiences of disadvantage with the officially sanctioned histories of disadvantage in the city.

In the final few weeks, the course enters a liminal period of creative negotiation between the end of course delivery and the presentation of the devised performance outcomes at the end of semester, where raw creative ideas and the processes through which they can be realised struggle against fears that projects are not good enough or, worse still, might not be completed in time. Students are encouraged to walk the city which, for many of them, is not the place where they grew up. Those who call Newcastle home are urged to look at their familiar surroundings differently; to picture the events that have occurred here in the past. They are encouraged to visit the specific streets and beaches where the histories they read about took place, to seek out old photographic views of the city, then go and stand in the place where the photographer stood, and to talk with people they come across. Inevitably, through this process of actively and consciously being in place, embodied in the here and now but carrying some knowledge about this place as it was in the past, ideas coalesce and draft scripts appear.

A diverse range of first-draft performances have been presented. Although the same materials are given to all students, the creative responses to them are unique to each devising group. Performances have included
cheeky music-video postings on YouTube,\textsuperscript{29} installations, movement pieces, movies, short plays and site-specific walking tours. In 2009, a large group of students researched a local issue which is, quite literally, dividing the city politically and geographically. The matter of the train line that runs through the city, separating the new foreshore developments from the dilapidated stretches of the main street, and thus creating a dead zone in the middle of town, is yet again a political issue generating strong oppositional arguments within the region. This is a matter that has been on and off the political agenda of the Lower Hunter region for 150 years, regularly reappearing as a proposal to close the line, with strong support from developers and garnering intense opposition from citizens who rely on the train line for their way of life.

On a hot afternoon in November, spectator-participants for a walking tour were summoned to gather at Wickham Station for a train ride to Civic Station, just a few minutes away. With a twist of irony, Newcastle’s trains were not running that day and spectators had to catch a bus instead. So began a walk along the threatened stretch of train line, among old rail buildings and across pedestrian overpasses. The walk and convivial talk among spectators was interrupted regularly as students appeared, presented performance moments, then disappeared into the urban landscape. Their songs, interactive arguments, ‘impromptu’ vignettes and short scripts were developed from the group’s contemporary and historical research, as well as their \textit{in situ} observations of people using and inhabiting this part of the city.

In late 2008, a group of students created another walking performance in which they led their ‘audience’ on a journey, visiting eight different sites in Newcastle East. Performances at each site referenced events from the past 200 years or so of white habitation; what follows is a summary of that event.

\textbf{‘Where the Coal Meets the Sea’, 5 p.m., 10 November 2008}

Invitations advised ‘audience’ members to gather outside the Surf Life Saving Club at Nobby’s Beach at 5 p.m. and to ‘look for the surf lifesaver’\textsuperscript{30} Unmistakable in a bright blue outfit – and under the critical scrutiny of the \textit{real} lifesaver who was still on duty that afternoon – our lifesaver introduced himself as our guide for the evening. Those with sharp eyes noticed a miniature \textit{Pasha Bulker} stranded on the beach below, with a small child in the cardboard ship staring resolutely out to sea.
Our route took us first along the coastal strip that skirts the steep rock walls of Fort Scratchley. As Newcastle is the busiest coal port in the world, it is an everyday occurrence to see many ships lined along the horizon, waiting to gain entry to the harbour. As we neared the Ocean Baths, a long line of children from Newcastle East Public School were strung out on the beach below the pathway, mimicking the ships lined along the horizon with their own cardboard cutout replicas. In front of the façade of Newcastle’s Ocean Baths (originally opened in 1922), a monologist told us of her love of shells washed up from faraway places and recounted her memories of the night in 1942 when Newcastle East was hit with shells, of another kind, from a Japanese submarine.
Our guide led us over a spur of land and down into Parnell Place to a public monument which commemorates the city’s economic reliance upon coal. As we approached, a nineteenth-century miner presented a hortatory speech to his fellow workers (the audience), the verbatim text of which was drawn from a newspaper report during the labour strikes of the 1890s. The next performance site was a terrace house not far from the coal monument in Parnell Place. Once inside, the audience were silent witnesses to a family meal, set in 1942, the night the shells from the Japanese submarine hit a house in that street. The smell of cooking sausages greeted us as we tiptoed through the narrow hallway and peered in on the family scene. The sounds of shelling shook the fragile house – generated by a sound system with large speakers on the floor below – and then the sounds of someone playing a 1940s tune on a piano drifted up the stairway. The family scene with two
little boys, their mother, the shelling, and the sounds of the piano, was a theatrical conflation of two separate historical accounts of the event which had been supplied in class readings.

As we left the terrace house and followed our lifesaver guide down a back alley, we heard a voice, raised in argument, coming from one of the back yards. We ‘startled’ a young woman in the middle of a heated phone conversation with her landlord about the appalling state of her rented house and its sixty roof leaks. What followed was an interactive and partially improvised conversation about the difficulties experienced by renters in the heritage precinct of the city. Our next stop was the renovated railway sheds in the Foreshore Park, where a community choir sang workers’ songs as we passed by on our way towards Horseshoe Beach. This is a popular spot for dog-walkers and families, a bend in the shore of the Hunter River before it heads out to sea and a catchment for all manner of detritus that washes down from up-river in times of flood. Although the shoreline has changed in recent decades, the dunes behind Horseshoe Beach – also known as Wavetrap Beach in the past – were the location of the Nobby’s unemployment camp of the 1930s. A small scene in a picnic shelter on the site of the old camp drew on documents from the 1930s and voiced diverse attitudes towards the camp and the plight of its inhabitants. The final performance site was on Horseshoe Beach among the evening beach-walkers and dogs.

Our guide ushered us into a tight pack within a V formed by two logs that had washed up on the shore. This was the prow of our ship and we were newly arrived convicts to the settlement of Newcastle. We waited, and Lieutenant Charles Menzies of the Royal Marines, the superintendent of the new settlement circa 1804, approached us from across the dunes. As he told
us of the hardships we would endure, and of the town we would build, we could see the outline of the city in the distance beyond the dunes, while behind us was the mouth of the river and Nobby’s, the outcrop which has long been recognised as the topographic icon of the region. The evening walk ended with a celebratory barbecue back at the railsheds with the audience, the performers, and the many children from the area who had participated in the ‘show’.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, a variety of outcomes emerge as first-draft performances at the end of the first-year course in devising performance. Students make their choice of topic in response to the local history sources that they are encouraged to investigate and their subsequent choices range, historically, from local Indigenous stories from before white inhabitation to the contemporary political and social issues that impact upon Newcastle today. Of the various performance outcomes, the site-specific walking performances certainly present the greatest challenge to both students and tutors. Bureaucratic and administrative hurdles, for example, must be overcome in order to take students off campus and into public areas controlled by the city council. Risk assessment forms have to be completed to satisfy the University’s insurance and safety obligations, while applications to perform in a public place must also be made to the city council. Students participate in all of these administrative tasks, however, so the learning outcomes extend beyond the creative and theoretical processes of the course. Through these kinds of experiences, Theatre and Drama students are encouraged to re-examine the vocabulary that has traditionally defined Theatre Studies; terms such as ‘audience’, ‘auditorium’ and ‘script’ must be re-evaluated within their context. These devised performance exercises also encourage students to critically consider the social function that performance can play in the broader society, while at the same time providing the possibility for students to develop collaborative skills, creative self-confidence and autonomy. Although it is challenging, in the current litigious climate, to move students into a geography beyond the University campus, the rewards in terms of the learning experience are certainly worth it.

NOTES

1 I want to extend my thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers whose comments helped to make this a better article, and to my colleague Dave Watt who introduced me to the course on devising in 2007.

2 For an extensive discussion of the many modes of creative practice that are covered by the term ‘devised performance’ and their histories, see Deidre Heddon and Jane Milling, Devising Performance (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2006); Deidre Heddon, Autobiography and Performance (London: Routledge, 2008); Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Katie Normington, Making a Performance
The University’s administrative code for this course is DRAM1020, Introduction to Drama 2. Drama at the University of Newcastle has offered undergraduate courses in devising performance since the late 1970s; the course discussed here was initiated by Kerrie Schaffer and David Watt in 2004. It is currently taught by the author and Brian Joyce.

17 See Heddon, Autobiography, for a comprehensive overview of contemporary autobiographical performance and its development since the 1970s.

18 Our discussion of ethical considerations addresses the cautions and potential problems associated with recording, transcribing, editing and eventually speaking the thoughts and testimonies of others who will not be on stage during the performance.

19 Lavery 149; Westcott 98.

20 Pearson 24.


22 Pearson 21.

23 Heathfield 17.

24 Ibid.

25 Pearson 23.

26 Due to the fact that Newcastle is the biggest coal port in the world, it is not surprising that the city is home to activist organisations such as the climate action group Rising Tide <http://www.risingtide.org.au>. Other activist sites to which students are directed for contemporary debate about the region include The Newcastle Herald <http://thenewcastlegerald.blogspot.com/> and Parks and Playgrounds <http://parksandplaygroundsmovement.blogspot.com/>.


28 Set up in 2003 by the University of Newcastle, the Coal River Working Party ‘aims to promote Newcastle’s culturally important landmarks in the Coal River precinct that were only recently placed on the NSW Heritage Register’. Online at: coalriver.wordpress.com/ (accessed 20 October 2009).

29 See ‘Nobby’s Girl’ by The Beachshop Boys on <youtube.com>.

30 Participant walkers included local historians and people otherwise associated with the Coal River Working Party, local school teachers, the course tutors, and the Mum and Dad of one of the performers.