

Drama, Landscape and Memory: to be is to be in place.

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ABSTRACT This paper is based on research that sought to identify the cognitive and emotive effect of a collaborative drama event that took place in unique landscape. Particular leitmotifs emerged from the research concerning identity and groups, the resonance of landscape, collective and childhood memory and the particularity of site-specific theatre. In this paper the author deconstructs two of these: landscape and memory. The concluding theories suggest that events of this nature can offer a sense of 'being in place' (Casey, 1993) The paper draws on two years of qualitative research of a many layered theatre education project taking place, annually, in Cornwall, England. Approximately 70 undergraduate students have taken this project to 3,500 primary school pupils, 100 primary school staff and 2,000 adult audience members each year; the practical research is drawn from all these participants, particularly the students.

Introduction

The research that underpins this paper was undertaken to identify value in an intensive artistic event, the 'Minack project'. Taking place in striking, powerful landscape annually since 1994, this collaboration between drama and landscape has been actively researched for two years (1997-99). Slowly, certain recurrent themes emerged during the research period. In this article, I focus on two: landscape and memory. (The other key themes were the role of identity - individually and as a group – and site-specific theatre.) These, in turn, have led to a theory about privileging place in our contemporary lives through potent artistic events. The paper starts with setting the context and outlining the research process. The research is analysed and I draw conclusions in the final section.

Context

'The Minack project' is the name given to a major theatre education project undertaken each summer by undergraduates on the B.A. (Hons.) Drama and Education degree at The Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD), London.[i] After several weeks of preparation in London, the project culminates in and near the Minack Theatre, Cornwall, U.K. comprising a week-long, large-scale production on the Minack stage with several additional small-scale drama projects in the local area. Direct participants in the project include: approximately 75 students from all three undergraduate year groups; a handful of graduates; ten CSSD staff; 150 primary school workshop participants; 50 primary and special school pupils undertaking residencies. Indirect participants

include: primary school audiences of 3,500; adult and family audience members of 2,500; 20 theatre staff.

Seating 750, the Minack is an open-air theatre, suspended on the edge of the cliffs at Porthcurno, Cornwall, three miles from England's south-western land's end. There is no *skenion*; the backdrop comprises endless sky, the Atlantic ocean and, in the foreground, haphazard chunks of Cornish rock. Occasionally, performers are upstaged by rock-perching, a-thespian fisherpeople, insensitive Isles of Scilly helicopters and playful basking sharks. First carved out of the rock and used as a theatre venue in the 1930s, currently the Minack operates a summer season of seventeen weeks with a different company occupying the space each week. A mixture of touring professionals, high quality 'pro-amateurs' and student groups, the companies have to be invited to perform by the theatre management. Eclecticism leads to a programme that could include *Macbeth*, *West Side Story*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and a variety of devised work within one season. The Minack is a cross between a tourist attraction and a non-subsidised commercial theatre. It is whimsical, ludicrous and maverick.

CSSD's 'Minack Project' comprises two strands. Firstly, approximately 38 first year undergraduates devise, design, craft, construct, rehearse and realise a major production for primary school and 'family' audiences under staff direction. This has taken place each year since 1994. There are five matinees and four evening shows in the week. Previous productions have been: *The Head of Snakes*; *Merlin's Child: the legends of Arthur*; *Land of the Forgotten Tide* (in the genre of Victorian tales of the imagination); *Jason and the Argonauts*; *Pirate Quest* (based on female pirates of the eighteenth century). These have been selected with the U.K.'s National Curriculum partly in mind. The productions have certain trademarks. They contain large group physicalised images, found sounds and group songs, inhabited creatures and a focus on the ensemble both in underpinning conceptual theme and in the style of performance. The narrative storyline is usually linear.

The second strand comprises several second year undergraduate groups working on complementary education projects in Cornwall such as: a week's residency in a Special Needs school (working with students with disabilities); a week's residency in a nearby primary school; pre-show workshops for schools coming to the matinees, touring workshops in schools; and the making of educational videos using one aspect of the Minack production.

Research

Men and women have long been concerned to come to grips with their environment and to understand the nature of the phenomena it presents to their senses. The means by which they set out to achieve these ends may be classified into three broad categories: experience, reasoning and research. (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p.1)

The selection of research tools and the process of this research have been entirely guided by the desire to 'understand the nature of the phenomena': the effects of the Minack project. This section outlines the three stages of the research, the research tools and an associated conundrum with the research process.

Firstly, I identified the general area of enquiry. This was to seek, in very general terms, the teacher, pupil and participating student responses to the Minack project. A research assistant was employed and a master's student used the Minack project for research of her own; this work was made available to me. The first stage of the research took place in April to November, 1997 although many of the responses included references as far back as the first Minack production in 1994. Whilst this was a 'loosely structured, emergent, inductively "grounded" approach to gathering data ... *something* [was] known conceptually about the phenomenon, but not enough to house a theory' (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p.27). Miles and Huberman go on to describe a developing 'conceptual framework' as 'the interrelationships between bins' (Ibid.p.28); in our research, the bins in the early stages were probably 'drama' and 'landscape'.

Certain rough themes, or 'codes', were emerging so these were the focus for the second stage of research (May to November, 1998). Again employing my research assistant, the research focused on landscape, community and collaboration. In addition, at this stage, I began to engage with appropriate theoretical fields.

The third stage of the research was undertaken by myself, January to March 1999. By this stage, it was clear that I had further to narrow the research. The most interesting research for me lay with the students and their reaction to our practice at the Minack. Whilst I have incorporated responses from children, teachers and other audience members in this paper, this has only been in relation to the central focus, the students' engagement with the project. During this stage, I focused particularly on landscape, memory and the ineffable aura of the project.

A number of different qualitative research tools were used in each of the three stages including observation, participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews, video taping, audio taping, several different types of questionnaires and several hundred photographs.[ii] All these techniques elicited useful data. The most effective method, however, was the audio-taped (and transcribed) semi-structured interviews. In the latter stages of the research I adopted the technique of asking interviewees initially to jot down a range of responses to the question. They used this as a jogger when speaking. In this way, the information had a more focused quality. For one of the last interviews, I sent the questions in advance and this provoked the most thoughtful and detailed response. Within this paper, I include approximately thirty different student responses selected from across five year groups.

There has been a conundrum attached to the process. Throughout, I have been aware of the problems of 'dual effect' associated with theorising one's own practice and the inevitable researcher bias. My research assistant admitted that the collection of data during the first stage of the research was hampered by her own bias. She had undertaken the project herself two years earlier and found changes to the project difficult to accept. Her summaries lack veracity because they lean towards negative comparisons. The research arising from the second year was far more useful, when she had more distance. My own involvement as instigator and co-director of each project negates real objectivity as well. If we are to attempt theories around our own practice, however, this seems inevitable. (It would be interesting to consider how this can be addressed.)

Leitmotifs

The analysis of the research is based on the emergence of commonalities or *leitmotifs*, arising out of the bric-a-brac of two years of ethnographic research evidence. In this paper I want to address just two of these *leitmotifs*: landscape and memory.

The Landscape

'I find it beautiful,' a third year student said. The Minack Theatre is carved into uncompromising rock on the south Cornish coast some 20 metres above the Atlantic. Downstage right sits the idyllic Porthcurno Bay, recipient of Cable and Wireless' hidden fibre optic cables and Cornwall's summer tourists. It is possible that some culture, secure in their relativist notions of beauty, would find the landscape ugly; none of our tourist- students have found it so.

Landscape is central to this paper. By 'landscape', I mean that seamless combination of wilderness and human contrivance that gives a curious sense of safety-in-the-wild whilst we are usually caught up, however momentarily, in the resonant beauty of the topography[iii]. Theoretically, landscape need not be beautiful. Culturally, we assume it is. Cultural assumptions are, in fact, locked into landscape (Schama, 1995, p.61) and there is more to be said about the spirit of place, mythology in landscape and cultural emplacement below. Here, however, I want to address the particularity of the landscape (broadly incorporating the 'theatrescape') and suggest some immediate reasons for the students' responses to its impact.

Many of the students commented on the beauty of the landscape without further qualification or attempts at justification. To describe it simply seemed enough. It was 'uplifting ... inspirational', 'wistful and romantic', 'treacherous', 'incredible', 'wild', 'vast' and 'a different country'. Some developed their descriptions: '[the] superficial security of technology is overridden by the natural'. Few separated the presence of the hand-carved theatre from the more natural aspects of the scenery. There was a sense of the two collaborating; the landscape was more powerful because of the presence of the theatre and, of course, vice versa. '[The theatre is] so unaffected it is almost part of the landscape ... part of that cliff'; '...you look out onto the cliffs and see that it has all been shaped by nature, then you are in this theatre ... but it all looks natural. There is something about it that looks like it could almost have been eroded away itself.' Yet it is the *juxtaposition* of the [wo]man-made and the elemental, rather than the elision of the two, that provokes the most interesting and thoughtful comments: 'You would suddenly look at what was going on on stage and then you would look up and see this beautiful, slightly scary, huge landscape and you felt quite frightened. Then you felt reassured that this would always go on, one way or another. These silly human beings are always going to do things like this and it looks so absurd and silly and puny. ... [Y]ou felt scared and then you felt reassured.'

It became clear that part of the impact of this annual happening is rooted in the sheer physical beauty of the landscape. In addition to this admiration, there is the challenge of confronting the elements and producing a tailored, controlled, finished, human event in a raw, uneven, uncontrollable geographical location of tempestuous humours: the puny humans versus the magnificent landscape.

We appear to have a deeply ingrained love of beauty in nature but *why* do we respond so vibrantly to beautiful landscape and what happens to make this response so powerful? There are many

associations of course, which doubtless affect our instinctive response, some of which I will touch on later such as 'escape' and the real or idealised memories of childhood. And there is, in all likelihood, simple contrast to consider Raymond Williams talks of the unmistakable 'pulse' and movement of city life in comparison to the 'lines received and lines made' of the country (1973, pp5/6) and many of our students do spend two thirds of their year in the endlessly pulsating London. The contrast with rural Cornwall is unequivocal and contrasts can strike deeply. However, this is not sufficient as an explanation. There is a sense of awe in the students as they talk of the Minack landscape. Even the unpoetic were grasping for language to explain a personal vulnerability and a public majesty. Perhaps our response is pre-conditioned by the archaeology of our knowledge (*sic* Foucault), the geological layers of foundations of beliefs? Since Romanticism, the West has been led to believe that wilderness and roughly tamed wildscapes (landscape) can be a route to self-revelation and profound truths. The 'idealist celebration of the self' and 'respect for the transcendental' (Flew, 1970, p.307) that characterises the Romantics is closely associated with their elevation of breathtaking landscape and the natural world as an important source of ethical truth. The Alps, for example, held profound revelations for both Ruskin and Shelley. (There is a similar sense of this deep awe and reverence in the students' responses to the Minack.) Is our modern reaction purely an inherited Romantic concept? "We think this because we've been programmed to think it"? Or could it be that our appreciation of (what is generally held to be) spectacular scenery is genuinely wrapped up in a rarely demonstrated desire for self-knowledge?

That possibility has twentieth century support. The moral philosopher and author Iris Murdoch suggests that we will become better people through truthful and patient 'attention' (1970 and 1992). By attending to things beyond ourselves, we can alter our consciousness 'in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism' and she cites beauty in nature as one source for 'unselfing' ourselves. (Attention to good art is another example, if more difficult to achieve.) If we attend to beauty in nature, we are removing ourselves from the 'messy, empirical psyche' and therefore taking our mind away from 'selfish care'. '[W]e take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees. 'Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical''. (Murdoch, 1970, p.85) Could there be a worthwhile and constructive mental process taking place when we regard, and attend to, powerful landscape? Are we 'unselfing' ourselves when we stand looking at the panorama of sky, sea, beach, Cornish granite and etched theatre space. From another field entirely, the archetypal psychologist James Hillman (1990) argues, also, for our 'attentive noticing'. He claims that modern human beings should return to attending to external images rather than giving primacy to subjective interiority. He suggests that we can use nature, particularly, for 'inspiration in the face of might and majesty, wonder over intricacy, rhythms and detail' although he goes on to recommend (rather unconvincingly) the replication of nature within human constructions (e.g. waterfalls in shopping malls) for achieving the same effect (Hillman, 1990, p.102/103). The American psychiatrist, Milton Erickson, sends some of his clients to open spaces because he believes that if you naturally extend your *physical* focal length, you can break through a narrow *psychological* view of your life. The students' responses echo this view. One student said, 'I was looking across to the horizon down over the theatre. The blue of the sky and sea faded into one with rocks framing the edges. There were no thoughts in my head – just a sense of the wonder of the world. Everything and nothing at once.' This description closely matches Casey's 'sonority of wilderness' (Casey, 1993, p.206). He suggests that to realise 'the sonority of wilderness' there has to be this balance of 'ground and things' (i.e. rocks and sea), 'arc and atmosphere' (i.e. sky and colour), the

‘surrounding array’ (the Minack aura, perhaps) and the body (i.e. the student). When these are in balance, as is suggested by the student’s response, there is equipoise, which provides a ‘sonorous experience’ for the interloper in the wild place.

There is more to be said about the impact of the landscape; there are other areas that could be explored. For example, the British have passed a bill (8.3.99) reinstating our right to roam over open countryside. It has been suggested that there are class issues involved in this hard fought battle (Aaronovitch, 1999). Is this something that possibly affects our (mainly socialist) student body when they descend on this ‘open space’ in Cornwall? Physical freedom is given to roam virtually without barriers. There may well be class issues at play here[iv].

It might also be worth exploring the British obsession with creating landscapes for pleasure. The eighteenth century ‘arcadia’ gardens are excellent examples of this. The Minack is on the edge of this fashion; it is a theatrical playground created for artistic pleasure. In all the productions at the theatre, the students have used the space inventively (discussed below). They take a great deal of pleasure in exploring the versatility of this reclaimed wilderness. Tracking the history of the ‘pleasure site’ may throw further light on the students’ delight with the landscape.

There is more to say about the particular elements of the landscape itself and the impact of these. Rock and water, alone, have many weighty associations. The need to carve into rock and mark it ritualistically, for example, is ancient. Water conjures up notions of the life-giver (and taker) and suggests fluvial routes to discovery of other lands. (Schama, 1995, addresses these comprehensively.) Again, it is possible that these ancient associations have an effect, perhaps unconsciously, on our students.

Whilst time delimits the exploration of these ideas, there remain other leitmotifs to discuss. I have placed the next, ‘escape’, as a sub-section of landscape as it is closely connected.

Escape

A London social worker in the audience admitted that she was temporarily escaping from her life. Many of the students who were interviewed mentioned similar feelings of escape. One graduate took this further by saying: ‘I feel as if I have grown up there and I don’t mean physically, from child to adult, but grown emotionally. There is nowhere to hide; you are literally at the land’s end. The only place to travel to is inner space. There, you are compelled to ask questions.’ She summarises the combination of escape, isolation, liminality and vulnerability that many others suggested. The geographical position of the Minack project gives a rationale for the intensity of such feelings.

Cornwall is remote. Mike Shepherd is the artistic director of Kneehigh Theatre Company, Cornwall’s only remaining professional theatre company. He clarifies this isolation:

Cornwall still has a strong sense of identity. That identity, the sea, the moon, the edge of the cliffs and the issues threatening where we live obviously influence us [Kneehigh]. Until recent history, Cornwall had less to do with the rest of this country than it did abroad. The connections with everything went by boat really; everything went out that way. (Shepherd in Mackey, 1997, p.118)

Cornwall is a peninsula. Indeed, until recently, the main route into the county was via a bridge over the Tamar River. Cornwall was difficult to access and roads were frequently blocked. For

centuries, the journey to Cornwall has been a long one for the British traveller. In our minds, Cornwall is a separate country, almost: it has its own traditions, myths and legends. For many, it is a place of wild imaginings; a place of smugglers and anarchy. The coastline and the sea are dangerous and rugged. Even the most pragmatic traveller has to recognise that the trains and many mobile phones stop at Penzance, fifteen miles inland from Land's End. The tip of Cornwall has resisted the industrial and the technological ages; it has maintained its isolation.

'Regions are forms of gatherings, and in this capacity they have powers and virtues of their own...' (Casey, 1993, p.73). In our minds, the region of Cornwall has certain embedded 'powers and virtues', then. It is distant, remote, isolated, rural, seabound, beautiful (in places) and, above all, a place for escape. The Minack, only three miles from Land's End, is a place for pausing, a place of temporary escape. As such, it is regarded by many, including our students, as 'an oasis of the soul'. (Aciman, 1997, p.35) Like any oasis, you feel encouraged to rest, take stock and refresh yourself for the next stage of life's journey. One graduate said: 'This is how beautiful life is ... it is not a concrete jungle of pain. You can have this, you can come here any time you want and with these people that you love.' Along with a London social worker, she uses the Minack as a place to escape the feeling of *Weltschmerz*. Because of its unique position, you are on the very edge of the land, on the threshold, at a liminal place. There is an enhanced sense, therefore, of being at the end of something, of making preparations for moving on, of crossing the next boundary. For one student to describe himself as 'emotionally vulnerable' when he is there is understandable. The physical edge of the world (the liminality, the physical vulnerability) may be echoed in the psychology of those playing there. Yet this sits side by side with a sense of profound reassurance; despite the emotional vulnerability, the same student finds it a place of security. This need not be a paradox. Students feel safe to rest and question at this waystation and, perhaps, feel protected enough to be 'emotionally vulnerable'. Student life, by definition, is transient. There is a possibility that our students see the Minack as some kind of escape-anchor in a continuum of change. One graduate spoke of her third year visit as a 'final event ... in which we could say goodbye to the place that had become the focal point of our degree'.

As a postscript to this section, it must be remembered that Cornwall has been a popular British holiday site for generations. The Minack project must take on some holiday features, particularly for those students returning annually. Favoured places create their own idyllic history; they become the repositories of our escapist dreams in the more pedestrian everyday world. Because we go there only rarely, we invest the place and the people with often impossible 'powers and virtues'. Our thoughts of such places glow with delightful idealism. As Inglis says:

The best meaning of the contemporary holiday is that, once away from work, away from the industrial city and its fearful, nameless crowds of people, we shall discover the magnificent freedoms and restorations of time and space, familiarity and strangeness, natural beauty and civic ritual. (Inglis, 1997, p.76)

Inglis nods at wish fulfilment and perhaps there *is* wish fulfilment in the expectations and responses of our students. This may be so, but it need not, of course, detract from the felt experience even should it be part of a self-created idyll. The Minack project gives students the opportunity to 'patiently attend' to a landscape, removing them from their own immediate concerns. At the same time it offers a refuge, a thinking place, an oasis at the very end of the country, physically distant from their daily existence.

Memory

For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock. ... [L]andscapes will not always be simple “places of delight” – scenery as sedative, topography so arranged to feast the eye. For those eyes, as we will discover, are seldom clarified of the promptings of memory. (Schama, 1995, pp.6/7, 18)

For Schama, landscape and memory are ineluctably linked. What Schama does in his seminal *Landscape and Memory* (1995) is to give an account of important landscapes by way of their history and culture. He suggests that landscape cannot be separated from human memories and cultural shaping and he gives us eclectic examples. What interests me particularly, however, is the making of memories *in* and partly *because of* the landscape, rather than recollecting history. If I could understand how and why such memories form, then I can move on to address the value of such forceful memories as key punctuation marks in our biographies. A couple of the students came close to identifying what’s important here: ‘I am very aware that actually you are only a product of your memory’; ‘I think the reason that you carry things like memory with you is partly to confirm your existence’.

All the students questioned from across the years agreed that the Minack project is ‘memorable’. However, I was particularly interested in two dominant threads: the building of a collective, shared memory and the importance of childhood in these memories. This can only take me a certain way to addressing ‘how and why such memories form’ but it is a useful first stage.

Collective memories[v]

Whilst each individual student has his or her own individual memories of the Minack project, they are also part of a collective memory, one that is shared by different people who have been involved across the years. (This collective memory is extended to the audience – particularly the teachers and children who return each year. One teacher spoke of the children’s need to be part of the experience by wanting further knowledge of the student company: ‘They all wanted to know about you. ... I had to read to them about your course [from the programme]. ... They got really interested in you: where you were at college, why you were doing it, as well as why you were coming to Cornwall.’)

The students themselves referred frequently to the building of a shared memory. They raise advantages and disadvantages to this but the majority recognise the gradual development of a history. One student described the building of five years of tradition and that this was ‘fantastic’. A sense of anticipation was created in the first years because of this, he felt. Another student spoke about the care that was needed to allow the first years ‘their’ year: ‘[D]on’t let them get the feeling that you are trying to take their year over. That is something that I think any older student has to bear in mind when they go down. They are there for support, they have had their time and it is a different time now.’ A number of students displayed a similar reverence for the development of the memory, recognising that comparative longevity of experience must not cloud the ‘first experience’ of the newcomers. There seemed a very real desire to add to this and to let others add to it. Inevitably, the collective memory has its pressures, as well. One student felt guilty because she didn’t feel that she was enjoying the experience as much as previous year groups. One second year student said wryly, ‘The hype that surrounded the Minack project can leave you feeling that

you did not enjoy it as much as other years. But now I am producing the same positive propaganda that the other years have.' Does this suggest that there is an unhealthy pressure created by the collective memory? Or is it just that a memory becomes more powerful in retrospect? This is familiar; we remember holidays similarly. The temporal and spatial distance removes the mediocre and leaves only the heights (or depths).

The key point here points to Schama and concerns the creation and embedding of cultural myths. As all drama educators are aware, drama productions gather their own stories, anecdotes, traditions, codes and hierarchies. A theatrical production is an intensive, creative, performed, structured event. It compresses and heightens the everyday and quickly develops its own mythologies. The Minack project has the advantage of taking place in a special site and repeatedly (if in different guises). Traditions, myths, legends and codes have been developing for five years. First year students are entering into a cultural heritage when they undertake the project. As with all such heritages, there are collective memories that are precious and valuable to the older members of the community. Some of the young, quite rightly, challenge and shift those memories by inventing their own rules and codes. Eventually, in their turn, these changes slip from the present to the past and become part of an increasing, shared history. The newcomers become the new elders. Gradually, those newcomers take on the mantle of passing on the memories, or, as the wry second year said, the 'positive propaganda', of the cultural heritage.

What is happening, it seems to me, is that the Minack project is becoming the physical and metaphysical site of a contrived cultural group. Collective memory is a feature of a shared culture. As with all cultures, some members remain at the edges. Others, for reasons of their own, grasp the very heart of the burgeoning culture and fiercely promote, guard, extend and care for it. The myths and traditions become deeply embedded and the memories act as dense and resonant layers of their biographies that may be recalled for use in later life. It would be interesting, however, to research more deeply into those who felt outside the collective memory, who do not share the intensity of the memory. To date, the research has focused on the positive response of willing interviewees. What would give balance would be to see how the 'non-believers' responded. In addition, there is the need for a longitudinal study of the use and effect of the memories for those who highly valued the project.

Childhood Memories

It is worth noting that childhood memories played an important part in the responses of these young adult students. 'For me it harks back to Scotland'; 'it reminds me a lot of home. It's a very wild landscape. You know that you have nothing between you and the elements there'; '[I]t is the atmosphere of the open air. The space it creates reminds me so much of being at home, going out into the country, walking in the hills with my grandparents, staying on the farm. ... It is the *association* with the atmosphere, of being on top of a hill, with being free perhaps. The feeling I had then of perhaps freedom, perhaps a happy time. ... I feel it as happy, natural'.

When questioned, it became clear that what counted was the remembrance of the *atmosphere* of childhood rather than the physical resemblance of two different sets of landscape. As the student above said, the feeling of 'freedom' and 'happiness' was dominant. Once again, this is familiar. Raymond Williams summarises, on behalf of others (including the poets, Wordsworth and John

Clare):

A way of seeing has been connected with a lost phase of living, and the association of happiness with childhood has been developed into a whole convention, in which not only innocence and security but peace and plenty have been imprinted, indelibly, first on a particular landscape, and then, in a powerful extension, on a particular period of the rural past, which is now connected with a lost identity, lost relations and lost certainties, in the memory of what is called, against a present consciousness, Nature. ... We have seen how often an idea of the country is an idea of childhood: not only the local memories, or the ideally shared communal memory, but the feel of childhood: of delighted absorption in our own world, from which, eventually, in the course of growing up, we are distanced and separated, so that it and the world become things we observe. (Williams, 1973, pp.138/139, 297)[vi]

The Minack project is placed in some of the students' minds alongside valued childhood memories. It evokes a time of 'peace and plenty', of 'innocence and security' and 'delighted absorption', perhaps. Childhood memories are formative, absolute, and unequivocal. They act as permanent markers and linger as sources of some curious form of metaphysical wisdom in our belief systems. These memories are probably idealistic representations of reality. There is truth, however, in the *feelings* evoked. We invest holidays with adult idealism; we invest childhood with far more but there is nothing false in the sensations produced by nostalgia. Many would say that, as adults, we have removed ourselves too much, that we 'observe' as Raymond Williams puts it, at the expense of participating. It could be that the Minack project postpones or temporarily shrugs off the heaviness of adult cynicism by taking students back to the 'delighted absorption' of childhood.

A site-specific memory

It is worth noting that the memories identified by the students often focused on the nature of the theatre and the style of the production fitting the space. The space is deeply engaging. An array of passages, niches, steps, hollows, climbable rocks and unusual entrances offer the performer an artistic playground. It is difficult to tell where theatre concrete finishes and rock begins. The stage is shallow and very broad; different sections of the auditorium receive different shows depending on which parts of the stage they cannot see. There is no real rationale for the design but as Brook says (talking about 'rough theatre'):

In other forms of architecture there is a relationship between conscious articulate design and good functioning: a well designed hospital may be more efficacious than a higgledy-piggledy one; but as for theatres, the problem of design cannot start logically. ... The science of theatre building must come from studying what it is that brings about the most vivid relationship between people and is this best served by asymmetry, even by disorder? (Brook, 1968, pp.73/74)

Of course, it is the 'disorder', the 'higgledy-piggledy'-ness, that provides the annual challenge and that gives the theatre its perennial attraction.

IOU, a company founded in Halifax, U.K. in 1976, define site-specific work:

The main difference with a show devised for a specific site rather than one devised to tour, is that the physical characteristics of the space condition the narrative, structurally and in content. The setting generates and shapes ideas. Shows are 'built in' to the place they are performed in. In a site-specific show, the relationship between theatre and 'reality' is changed. There may be a clear 'edge' – sometimes danger. (cited in Mason, 1992, p.137)

There is no question that devising the annual production to the precise qualities of the Minack Theatre has a considerable effect on the students' response to this event. The topic and the style have to work with the space. When past students refer to what a Minack production should be, it is this that they hold as important. The subject matter has to rest easily in the site. The theatre is a

place of romance, escape, childhood, playfulness but it is also just on the edge of danger. Productions work well when they match the aura of the theatre. The Central house style allows the students to work immanently with the theatre. They crawl over it, race up and down the auditorium, climb rocks, speak from distant headlands, push along rows of children, appear suddenly from behind pillars and blunder across the stage inside huge Welfare-State (and, latterly, Julian Crouch) inspired puppets. The nature of the ensemble work can create a powerful dramatic effect on stage: a combination of theatrical energy and theatrical imagery that they create and sense simultaneously. The method of performance allows the company to explore the space fully. Offstage acting is most effective and it is this excitement of finding a complete personal show that many students relish. Unlike most theatres, this offstage action is in sight of many of the audience. So gently, almost imperceptibly, this weaves a full and complete narrative for the audience and performers alike. Immensely satisfying for the performers, they improvise and experiment with their roles in every show. The ‘delighted absorption’ of the actor in his or her comprehensive role is one more striking element of the totality of the Minack experience.

The dramatic activity that underpins the Minack project has not been explored fully in this paper although it was, of course, the focal point in all the research. I have touched on it in this section only. However, it is crucial to recognise that the theatre production and accompanying workshops were at the heart of the project. The students constantly referred to these in the interviews and questionnaires. *All* the emerging *leitmotifs* sprang from the pleasure of participating in the theatre event itself and the extension of dramatic learning. If I had selected one of the other key themes to address (site-specific theatre), this would have been more closely discussed.

Conclusions

This research started because I wished to establish the worth of a particular dramatic experience. Students have found value in the Minack project because it allowed them to: identify with a group; ‘unself’ themselves and escape; be part of the creation of a collective memory; recall past ideals; and participate in an immanent, all-embracing theatrical experience. There is no intention of suggesting that all these happened to all the participating students. There were a handful of students who were visibly unaffected by the Minack project. However, the majority found the experience memorable and important and many were deeply affected.

There was one clear *leitmotif* that I have not addressed above however, because in a sense it has no name. It is the ineffable, the inexpressible, the thoughts and feelings that were so hard to express. Analysing the inexpressible is challenging but these hesitantly worded phrases contribute significantly to the conclusions. One graduate found it impossible to respond to a questionnaire because she didn’t believe that she could ‘be genuine enough’ in words; she ‘always had a hard time expressing what happened when you go there’. Many of the students had a similar difficulty: ‘There are many elements that I have taken from my experience and will probably affect the future but at the moment they are very hard to identify and comment upon’; ‘the power of the Minack is hard to put into words. It is a feeling that I will take with me and never forget’; ‘there is a real kind of primitive quality somehow but I think that is where the magic is. Which is why it is so difficult to touch because it is part of ourselves that we try to depress a lot of the time and then when you have to try and key into it ... you can’t say why, how or what the impact is’.

One graduate was trying to explain the ‘completeness’ of the experience; he is now employed to work on the project: ‘The Minack takes the whole of me to do. To enter into that experience, it takes the whole of me. ... I think that I find that recharging.’ Another said: ‘It’s about going down there and being part of an *experience*’. Several students referred to a kind of spirituality: ‘There is a certain kind of person that will pick up on what is there, the spirituality, the kind of magical aspect that is there’; ‘the place is so spiritual’; ‘every time I go back it just blows my mind ... there is a bit of karma going on’; ‘it had a magical power’; ‘it’s very spiritual’; ‘when you go through the gate at the top and you come to the bottom, to me it seems like a different country, a different world, not that we are in a different country – but it’s not on earth. That sounds so stupid but for me it feels like a place removed from the world and therefore it allows me to be in any period of my life that I choose ... I am in limbo’.

What significance does the ‘spiritual’ and ‘magical’ have? It is another ingredient to add to the cumulative effect of the Minack project experience.

‘To be is to be in place’ (Archytas, adapted by Casey, 1993, p.14)

There is a debate in postmodernist theory about the role of place today. On the one hand, ‘[F]uturists predict that the most profound shift to occur in the twenty-first century will be the shift from a place-oriented to a ‘placeless’ society...’ (Hill in Hill and Paris, 1998, p.102). On the other:

Though it may seem that cyberspace is outpacing physical space as a locus for social and cultural interaction, the role of real, physical, public space is actually increasing for some kinds of contact. (Brent Ingram, Bouthillette, Retter, 1997, p. 4)

Casey takes this much further in *Getting Back into Place* (1993) by presenting a lengthy plea for privileging place in the modern world. His esoteric argument distances the postmodern notions and promotes the pre-modern: the formative and lasting role of places in our lives. It is the edge of this argument that I want to suggest is of value here for it is the idea of a ‘placeless’ society that many find so alarming[vii]. It is possible that the combination of postmodern fragmentation and the cybernetic age will lead to widespread atopia (literally “without place”). We are an increasingly mobile society inhabiting frenetic lives of constant motion. Added to this, when we *are* static, we open our computers and tap into knowledge or contacts somewhere in the placeless ether. To combat this, there is perhaps a need for permanent waystations, accessible oases, special places that can offer us known, fixed, stable points in the midst of the “non-places” (Auge, 1995).

There is a suggestion that across the years of the Minack project, many students have constructed such a site, a place, a ‘triad of local, locale and location’ (Probyn in Brent Ingram et al, p.8) to act as a counterpoint for their (doubly) transient lives. Some engage with this lightly, others deeply. They collectively, and often unconsciously, build a physical and metaphysical special place. It is not a simple site; it is not *just* physical. David Williams comes close when he describes ‘place’ as ‘both a geophysical site and a set of ideas or constitutive myths jostling for position’ (Williams, 1998,p.vii) but it is more than this, even. A special place is somewhere where you are at liberty to do a number of things: question; be ‘under the same orders’ as others; be ‘emotionally vulnerable’; feel ‘in limbo’; feel secure; develop and share values; recall an idealistic past; travel inside yourself; be at peace; recharge. The special place may be physically and aesthetically attractive: somewhere you want to see because it pleases your senses and when there, you are at ease: ‘The body and landscape write letters to each other’ (Moore, 1998, p.2[viii]). It is not ‘home’ because it does not host everyday enervation and ennui, although ‘home’ frequently

adopts the mantle of a special place, and certainly this is so when you leave it for any length of time. Nor is it Foucault's heterotopic counter-site, although dominant ideologies *are* often challenged because of the immanent questioning when 'in place'. It is a place that has been formed through the conjunction of drama, landscape and memory. When students leave this special place, many suffer from the classic signs of atopia (placelessness): depression, disorientation and homesickness. Many choose to return.

This research started from a wish to understand the value of an intensive dramatic event. Following soon after came the desire to regard this as theorising our practice. Emerging *leitmotifs* demanded analysis and this analysis suggests a theory: that if certain elements combine successfully (site-specific theatre, working in a knowable community with, knowable stories, powerful landscape and so on) our students will gain a sense of place that acts as a key positive memory in these most transient years.

Yet, as with so much research, there are more questions than answers at this stage. Practical research projects can help take the work further. For example, can a sense of 'being in place' be contrived if various facets of a project are enhanced and emphasised from the initial stages of the work? Is this even ethical? If certain key elements are removed (e.g. that *particular* landscape) but others remain, how would this affect the student group's responses? In a fluid, solipsistic, postmodern society, can we ever form a theory such as this when we are dealing with individual responses to aesthetic, artistic events? A longitudinal study may help but to what extent will responses be provoked and prompted simply because the subject is being reopened *for* the research? As I touched on earlier, how 'true' can the research be when the researcher has an un-objective, key role in the work? (Can it only ever be action research, in the sense of improving one's own practice?)

There are ways forward, however, even by making steps to answer these questions. These include undertaking two practical research projects (to test the theory), followed by looking outwards and studying the work of other practitioners in this field. Perhaps there may even be some answers!

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NOTES

- [i] CSSD is a specialist college of higher education in Drama with approximately 750 students. The range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses include the study and practice of drama and theatre education, drama teacher training, theatre design (including stage management, puppetry etc.), actor training, drama therapy, voice studies. The B.A. (Hons.) Drama and Education has a broad curriculum including the theory and practice of theatre and drama and focuses particularly on the role of theatre/drama education in society.
- [ii] Across the two years this has comprised: observation of approximately three weeks of rehearsal; videoing of two rehearsals; attendance throughout the Minack week observing rehearsals, workshops and all performances in Cornwall; approximately 250 questionnaires to students and teachers; interviews with four classes of pupils; in-depth interviews with three classroom teachers; videoing of two classes after seeing the production; videoing six different performances (two in London, four in Cornwall); in-depth semi-structured and structured interviews with approximately thirty students, four members of staff and two theatre staff. Transcriptions were made of all the interviews; the research assistant, Vic Kemp, maintained an overview of her work and made several summaries during the two years.
- [iii] The history of 'landscape' is interesting. A word imported from Holland, it grew in the English consciousness in the 17th century. For further information on the history and description of the term see Williams, 1973, pp120-126, Shama, 1995, pp.10-13 and Open University's *Reading the Landscape*, 1999.
- [iv] As an extension to this point, however, it is possible to claim the opposite for race and sexuality. One of the students came to London from a rural part of England with his male partner when starting the degree. In London they found acceptance and freedom to live that had not been the case previously, in a rural environment. They were aware of covert criticism of their homosexuality at the theatre itself.
- [v] This is not to be confused with Jung's collective unconscious. By 'collective memory', I mean a memory that has been collected together through the telling and sharing of several individual and group stories.
- [vi] As Raymond Williams points out, mourning the lost idyll of rural existence is an ongoing habit of each successive generation. Whilst those at the end of the twentieth century look back a hundred years or so as a time of rural ideals, Williams finds similar examples across each century right back to the end of the Magna Carta in 1215! (Williams, 1973, pp.9-12.) Stuart Hall extends this theme in *Reading the Landscape*, an Open University programme, by emphasising the social, political and economic forces that were the real creators of our 'chocolate box' view of the English countryside.
- [vii] A time of increasing placelessness in every continent, it is very much part of the European consciousness at the time of writing. Refugees from mid-Europe roam the world in search of new lives and homes.
- [viii] Similarly: 'Place is what takes place between body and landscape' (Casey, 1993, p.29).