

## Documentation for Break-out Session of *Shift Happens* July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2008 –

**Speaker: Richard Sobey of IOU.**

**Moderator: Dan Bates of York Theatre Royal:**

IOU is a mature experimental company with an international reputation. It is at the forefront of cross artform/experimental theatre and has pioneered and established many of the artistic forms now taken for granted. IOU has always pushed the technical elements within a show and a surprising use of these has always been a recognisable feature of the work. Richard will focus on the use of RFID and tracking technology in the creation of IOU's recent *Waylaid* show to discuss the use of technologies in exploring performer and audience relationships and in the process of creating art works.

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### **Introduction**

“I want to try and look at the use of technologies in exploring performer and audience relationships in live work and in the process of creating art works.

I will talk briefly about a specific performance project - *Waylaid* - as a way of opening out the subject for discussion.

IOU has been making work for over 30 years, but we see ourselves as experienced rather than experts since we are still exploring and questioning techniques.

The continued exploration of new methodologies is vital for us. Therefore, I want to be able to hear about your experiences as a way of exploring the theme so I will talk for a short time and then we can open it out to questions and discussion.

A bit about whom we are.....”

### **On IOU:**

“IOU creates works across a variety of media, including touring theatre productions, site-specific events, interactive digital works, video and sound installations and exhibitions.

We are driven by a desire to explore and experiment with ways to combine different art forms. We devise and make all our work from scratch.

Our teams are built up of makers, sculptors, painters, poets, musicians, performers as well as structural and electronic engineers - and digital media and technical experts.

Continued experimentation, the development of working practices and the exploration of new artistic relationships directly informs and facilitates future work, allowing us to continue to push at what we do in a variety of new contexts - both inside and outside of theatres.

IOU has always pushed the technical elements within a show - whether that be complex mechanical or digital constructions or simple pulleys and handles! The technical has always been a recognisable feature of the work.

Before I talk about the technology, I want to say a little about our approach to the audience relationship.”

### **IOU's approach to audience relationship:**

“For us, the relationship with the audience is a key consideration in the creation of a theatrical experience. We work to create a believable world that the audience inhabits for the duration of the experience. This is incredibly important to us. This world may contain fantastical elements, but, hopefully, these make sense and have logic within the world we have created and the world that the audience explores.

Many of us come from a visual arts background where we would spend ages alone in a studio creating works that would be presented in galleries. It was a constant frustration for us that we would never get any feedback from those who visited the galleries. We were not there. It was this desire for a relationship with an audience and feedback that led us to creating live works. We have been exploring this relationship in a variety of ways ever since.

To give you some examples of this, a few years ago we created a site-specific show called *Cure* for an underground mill space with vaulted ceilings from which dripped plenty of water! The show took the theme of illness and remedy. This was effectively an environment - an installation of several built spaces - that the audience explored to discover a variety of remedies and cures.

Rather than a more traditional stage and raked seating, we created a single environment inhabited by both the audience and the performers. This allowed us to concentrate on detail to create an intimacy that meant the audience could get close up, touching things and becoming enveloped inside the world of the show.

Our next show - *Tattoo* - was a large scale outdoor show for 2000 people. Effectively this was a giant insect colony with 30 foot high mechanical insects that moved through the audience.

We did not want to create a performance space with a huge crowd of people standing round it. We therefore conceptualised the show as inhabiting the audience space. The show moved into and around the audience so that the focus of attention shifted and events occurred simultaneously - again immersing the audience in a very particular world and experience.

The show that I want to focus on today came out of the experience of creating these two shows. For *Cure* - the audience inhabited an environment populated by performers. For *Tattoo* - the show inhabited the audience space. In both these we are blurring the distinction between audience and performance space. For *Waylaid* - at least for the starting point for *Waylaid* - we wanted to explore the possibilities in blurring the distinction between audience member and performer - I don't mean audience participation, but looking at how audience members could appear to be performers and part of the world we have created.

Before I talk further about this, a quick word about our approach to technology.....”

### **IOU's approach to technology:**

“I think it is important to say that we are very interested in technology - the use of it, the development of it, what it means for us as social beings, how it will shape social spaces and interaction in the future. I spend hours wandering my way through a variety of online spaces - usually before breakfast!

However, it is also worth pointing out that we are as happy with a handle and a piece of string as an infrared triggered switching gateway!

For IOU, we are interested in creating that believable world. The use of technology is a technique to achieve the atmosphere and effect we want or to enable particular relationships, dialogues and explorations. Low tech solutions are as valid as high tech ones. Invisible and embedded is important. We are not showcasing technology in our shows.

I want to talk about our use of RFID technology - Radio Frequency Identification - and specifically the development of *Waylaid* as an example of how invaluable technologies can be in developing ideas and themes themselves - rather than just providing technical solutions.

This is because I want to demonstrate how technologies can help shape the development of theatrical work - how they can support the development of concepts, enable devising and R&D and allow the exploration of ideas and themes. This is beyond - and in addition to - allowing for the practical realisation of ideas in a way that may not have been possible in the past. These things allow us, as artists, to continue to push at creating theatrical experiences that allow us to explore what it is to be human.

I would also want to point out that online communities have also allowed us to network internationally tapping into an open wealth of skills, experience and interests. Our ability to develop theatrical ideas is informed by feeding in information, experiences and responses from our online relationships as well as the essential face-to-face in playing with materials and ideas.

And so to the development of *Waylaid* and our use of RFID technology.....”

#### **Where the use of RFID came from:**

“As I said, we were interested in blurring the distinction between audience member and performer after our experiences with *Cure* and *Tattoo* - the idea that individual members of the audience or groups of the audience are seen as performers to other members of the audience.

We discussed all sorts of ideas about this - how we might create this impression, the situations where this can happen, how to trigger it and how to manage it.

We quickly liked the idea of a show with the theme of queuing as a theme in which to blur queuers and queue managers (audience and performers). It is also a nice English theme with international touring potential!

We discussed ideas like creating an experience where the audience queues to get into a show and around them there is a variety of events and atmospheres while they move forward in the queue. We even liked the idea that as they reach the front of the queue they get on a bus that takes them back to the beginning and that that is the end of the show!

Of course, keeping, say, 150 people moving and involved would take a lot of performers - too many for our budget so the idea of blurring the distinction between audience member and performer became more and more attractive!

In the devising meetings we were having, we started to discuss the use of technologies to deliver events and actions as well as to manage the movement of audiences and the relationship between them and the performers. This would allow us to achieve more without additional performers or technicians.

For example, we liked the idea of gateways that were triggered to allow some people through one way and others another - denying and allowing access to particular areas; having some experiences accessible by some people and not others - as a way of creating an immersive experience.

Our thoughts revolved round truth and falsehood; reality and fiction; and predetermination and serendipity. This links with the ideas about who is a character and who is an audience member. You can hopefully see how our thinking was developing.

The use of RFID technology came up fairly quickly as a way of managing these sorts of things. RFID tags and electronic readers built into the space could allow us tag and track the movement of each individual member of the audience so we would know exactly where they were in the performance space.

It meant we could attach events to specific people so that they continually trigger actions and therefore would appear to be performers. For example, doors remaining locked until that person arrived; screens that flickered into life as they approached; sounds triggered about certain actions; electronic dogs that followed them about the space.

*(RS distributes an RFID tag to the audience).* Here is one of the tags. They can be very small so the audience does not have to know that it has been tagged. We looked at embedding them into programmes or into clothing that we would require audience members to wear or things they have to pick up and carry.

The tags also meant that we could attach specific information to individuals as we know exactly who has what tag. We explored the idea of capturing data about each person as they entered the show - asking them specific questions so we could interweave the answers in the fabric of the show.

The idea being that if we could engage with specific members of the audience in very personal specific ways during the show, other members of the audience would think that they were part of the show - ie performers.”

### **What actually happened:**

“Of course, the next step in our development was to get some technology to play with! We got a grant from a Foundation to do this. We applied to ‘explore the use of cybernetic systems and electronic tracking technology in the design and realisation of a theatre show in which the audience are immersed inside the action and become characters in the show to push further at the depth of experience for individual audience members’. The research was very successful. We got a load of equipment - and a load of people to tag and off we went.

We looked at how far control and feedback systems could be used to monitor, map and encourage the audience into specific positions and roles - and whether new software was needed and if it could be written economically. We also looked at: how much is automated in the show; whether the audience engage with machines/robotics or performers; how many people would be needed to manage the technology; even whether it was to explore two small audiences that do not know of each other's existence. The actual experimentation as well as the results fed back into the development of ideas in devising.

As the research developed, we explored the use of headphones for audience members as a way of passing instructions to individuals - another way of exploring ways of making people look like part of the performance. eg. ‘please pick up this broom and sweep the floor’. We wanted to see if people would do this and how far they would go comfortably.

It is at this stage that a very interesting thing happened.

We were able to play with the way people listened and concentrated on the speech delivered by the headphones. This became the focus for a lot more work - exploring the intimacy and concentration that the headphones afforded us.

We developed ideas about the internal voice in our heads and about the visual detail we create in our heads with words. I see this as similar to what we nicknamed ‘radio-play syndrome’ where, for example, you find you have stopped cleaning the house mid-sweep because you find yourself totally drawn into an aural world, fully captivated and immersed in that world.

Very quickly the show cohered around this so that we moved towards a central character whose internal voice was placed inside your head with the headphones. We explored ideas about suspended animation, being in a coma, the point between consciousness and unconsciousness, of moving between worlds, of cross-firing and mis-connection of thoughts. We came quite quickly to the concept of a woman unconscious following a car accident.

We used wireless headphones and transmitted sound directly into people heads (so to speak) as well as sampling the actual live performance space to mix real world sound and recorded sound. It allowed us to play with concepts so that, for example, the main character is able to harmonise with herself as an internal voice. We were also able to overlay the woman's thoughts and comments about her own memories as they arrive in her head so that she is, at one and the same time, re-living a moment, commenting on it and lying there unconscious.

So.... this is where Waylaid came from. The final description of the show is:

A woman unconscious and frozen in a snow-covered desert. The only evidence of how she came to be here is a wrecked car. As she begins to gather her thoughts, the inhabitants of this wilderness emerge and dissolve in the whiteness - alarming and engaging, propelling her forward and hemming her in.

Enter a very private world of subtle surprises, changing expectations and unpredictable outcomes. Witness a life pass before your eyes in this intensely intimate show.”

### **And the RFID?:**

“Oh, and no RFID in the show! I have deliberately chosen to talk about *Waylaid* and its lack of RFID today! This is the interesting thing about using technologies in developing ideas for shows.

In the process of creating art works, it is in the exploration and playing with both ideas and materials that interesting directions are revealed and can be explored. Technologies both facilitate and enhance the capabilities of this. They are now relatively cheap and accessible. They don't confine you to specific directions or approaches - or even specific expertise.

Utilising a variety of tools in devising and development can lead to the creation - or discovery - of new directions. It is NOT a case of developing ideas and then looking for technical solutions for them.

For IOU, the use of technologies should be part of the creative process dealing with the conception and development of ideas. Things have definitely moved on from a technical department out the back that builds to a designer's brief.

These technical explorations form the context for exploring concepts and thematic ideas related to artistic content - this is beyond the actual mechanisms and technical solutions for delivering ideas.

In our case, we would never have revealed *Waylaid* - a highly successful show - without the use of RFID technology. It was particularly useful in developing ideas about intimacy and the close relationship between audience, performers and the environment each inhabits.”

### **Further outcomes:**

“Our use of RFID technology also directly spawned ideas for several new projects - great value for the funder and brilliant for us!

The experience and expertise gained in this exploration with and through technologies also directly led to a commission to create a digital installation exploring the use of RFID technology for The European Centre for Data Capture and Automatic Identification as well as commissions for new sound and video installation work in both the UK and in China.

The use of a variety of technologies in the creation of a show provides artists with a range of tools and methods to build experiences that continually define and re-define what we call 'theatre'.

Thank you.”