

## CHAPTER 16

# PRACTICE AS RESEARCH INTO LEARNING EVERYDAY URBAN PLACE-MAKING THROUGH THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

By Alex Halligey

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter considers the PaR process of my doctoral work to offer practical possibilities for structuring PaR and for devising methods to support it. I work chronologically through the process, starting with a discussion of how I used PaR methods to find an articulation for the methodology that would guide my research, focused as it was on theatre and performance as conceptual lenses and research tools for exploring the everyday place-making practices of an inner city Johannesburg suburb. I then consider the second phase of the research which involved 'tester projects' experiment with and select participatory theatre and performance methods for exploring the everyday place-making of city spaces, as well as experimenting with how theatre and performance might represent the findings on everyday place-making practices to public audiences. Moving to the third phase I discuss the core work of my PhD research: a participatory public art project run in Bertams, Lorentzville and Judith's Paarl, Johannesburg from 2015 to 2016. This third phase of the research came to have four, smaller phases within it: an initial engagement with the area, a year-long participatory project, a culminating site-specific play made with professional actors and local participants and a kind of epilogue of concluding, but also establishing ways of continuing, the participatory engagements in the area. This epilogue to the third phase of the research overlapped with the fourth phase: the writing up of my thesis. In considering the fourth phase I unpack how the writing and reading methods, that were part of my PaR toolkit all along, became foregrounded and how this served the PaR. Finally I turn to the PaR work that came after the more obvious conclusions of the PhD products, reflecting on the nature of the ongoing cycle of PaR.

### **PaR BEFORE THE PaR**

In 2005, Sara Matchett invited me to join an ensemble of performers/ theatre-makers/ facilitators in making a work under her direction in Darling, Western Cape, for the Voorkamer Fees. We were to devise a performance in collaboration with ten women resident in Darling that would take place in three different homes spread across the village. The production, *Breathing Space*, was both a work of The Mothertongue Project, the women-led theatre and integrated arts company that Matchett is a founding member of, and the major project of her coursework MA at what was then the Drama Department,

now the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies (CTDPS) at UCT. Matchett wanted to use participatory theatre, performance and integrated arts methods to enter into a dialogue with the women we worked with about their daily lives and how their living took place in and through the geographic areas of Darling, still starkly racially segregated post-apartheid.

In 2009 a theatre-maker friend, Nicholas Dallas, lent me Michel de Certeau's *The practice of everyday life* (1988). In 2008 Dallas had started an MA at UCT, the same coursework MA programme Matchett had done. Though he didn't continue with the degree, Dallas was so struck by a chapter from *The practice of everyday life*, given as prescribed reading early on in the programme, that he had ordered his own copy of the whole book. I was deeply struck by it too, as I found it to be speaking into my own fascination with place: our attachments to it and our role in creating it through our daily actions.

These two moments were key in the genesis of what was to become my doctoral research. De Certeau's theorisations articulated much of what I had found so valuable and necessary in the making of Breathing Space in Darling. Conversely, the making of Breathing Space put theatre and performance practice in the service of understanding the practices of daily life and its politics, which is De Certeau's concern. An idea for a project came together in my mind: to understand more about the everyday space and place-making practices of inner city Johannesburg through working with theatre and performance in a similar way to how Matchett facilitated the *Breathing Space* project. The idea felt to me an inspiration, and the necessity for doing it was consumingly compelling, with the 'why' for the necessity at this point not articulable beyond being able to say I had a hunch.

Looking back, the idea for the project that came to me in 2009 was a resolution into a structuring form of so many of my entwined artistic, intellectual, ethical, political and personal investments, which, up until that time, had been swirling in me and around me as impulses and fragmented expressions in formal and informal conversations, in my theatre-making work, and in my reading and writing (personal correspondence, creative writing and under-graduate scholarship). My PaR endeavour had already begun, and making Breathing space and reading *The practice of everyday life* were major guiding, mutually informing practices that helped me to articulate and initiate what was to become my PhD project. Interestingly, even at the outset – before I was employing any conscious methodological approach – the research was emerging through the integration of theatre practice and reading scholarly writing. And, also at the outset, the project was clearly about art and research, not one or the other. The art was to be used to learn something in a particular way about a particular city space, but there was also something to learn about the art, about what theatre and performance as an artistic form could do in responding to everyday urban space- and place-making.

This set me on the track to doing a coursework MA degree in performance studies at New York University to get more of a grounding in the critical theory of how performance might apply, in practice and concept, to socially engaged concerns.

### **STARTING THE PaR: ARTICULATING A METHODOLOGY**

In July of 2014, I was starting a PhD with the Drama Department (now the CTDPS) and the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at UCT and had six months to write and formally submit my proposal. Essentially this meant I had only three months to arrive at a final draft proposal, because the other three had to be set aside for the departmental review, ethical clearance and revisions before final submission to faculty. Compelling as my project idea was, there was much I needed to understand and define. I knew about theatre-making – I had something of a grounding in performance studies theory – but how I would situate my research in urban studies was unknown to me in any formal way. I felt like I was trespassing on a field beyond my scope, and was daunted at the prospect. Edgar Pieterse, my supervisor from the ACC, put together a crash course reading list in urban studies for me, and Mark Fleishman, my supervisor from the UCT Drama Department, gave me three key pointers:

- Drawing on anthropologist, Tim Ingold, he advised me to “dwell” (2000) in the landscape of my research and see what emerged. The landscape was: the daily reality of Johannesburg, writing on Johannesburg, public art projects in Johannesburg in the preceding 15 years (roughly 2000 to 2014), urban studies literature, literature on participation, theatre and performance studies literature, thinking from all disciplines on place and on learning through practice, and a theatre historical review of site-specific, performance-based work.
- He suggested I ‘structure the unstructuredness’, dividing the hours of my week up into different kinds of ‘dwelling’: sit on the same park bench for an hour, the same hour each week; x amount of hours of urban studies reading, y amount for theatre and performance reading, etc.
- He said I should read to find the language to articulate the PaR approach for my project. PaR might be the overarching methodology I was intending to use, but finding theorists that spoke to me would help to articulate the specifics of the PaR methodological approach for *this* research.

My initial methods in this proposal phase were then:

- Walking through different areas of Johannesburg’s CBD and inner city suburbs for an afternoon or morning at least once a week.
- Dividing my weekly reading time between the literature of the different fields that the research was at the intersection of.
- Interviewing artists and scholars whose work, or aspects of it, focused on Johannesburg.

I gave myself permission for all of July and half of August to just do these activities and to make notes, let thoughts float up, but without the pressure of starting to formulate

my proposal. I was determined to practice walking, reading, conversing, writing to see what the practices might reveal to me of a way forward with my research. Mid-August I started writing. The most significant emergence out of this period of 'dwelling in the landscape of the research' was the articulation of my methodology, drawing on Tim Ingold's *Making: anthropology, archaeology, art, architecture* (2013) in which he proposes that we think through "making with" the materiality of the world. Ingold figures this "making with" as a correspondence, "not to describe the world, or to represent it, but to open up our perception to what is going on there so that we, in turn, can respond to it"(7).

In the PhD proposal I described Ingold's "thinking through making" in terms of my research as follows:

My proposed methodology is then to work with the materiality of Johannesburg where not only asphalt, concrete, steel, grass, bodies, clothing, rubber, but also novels, poetry, non-fiction and academic writing, art works (theatrical, performance and visual art), conversations all constitute the materiality of the city. Through working with these materials by conversing, reading, writing, conceptualising and making my own participatory arts project, I will be both learning the nature of everyday performance in relation to Johannesburg's built environment and be finding ways to correspond with this materiality through the making of academic writing and the making of art. (Halligey, 2014:6-7)

I was describing what I had been doing in my initial research for the proposal and describing not so much the methods (or what we might call the practices, the activities), but the intent with which I was doing them, my methodology: to enter into a correspondence with the city. Paying attention to my practice in this phase helped me to see and name the ideological underpinnings of how I wanted to use the PaR.

### **DEVELOPING METHODS**

The reading, writing, walking and interviewing started in the first phase and continued in this second one, which ran from January to October 2015. During this developing methods period I drafted two chapters of my thesis – a literature review and a case study chapter looking at two recent participatory, public art projects in Johannesburg's inner city – and I ran two 'tester' projects. The first was a voluntary project that took place over eight Saturday mornings with University of Witwatersrand (Wits) students and lecturers from the School of the Arts and the School of Architecture and Planning. The workshop series culminated in an exhibition of art objects and interactive performance works that reflected on the participants' responses to Braamfontein, the inner-city area where Wits is located. The second was part of the coursework I was teaching on the Drama Department Honours programme at the University of Pretoria. Through a series of in-studio explorations and public-space interventions designed by the students in this second project, we explored Pretoria as a city, creating a final performance work called *Opsoek/ Descuberta/ Finding Pretoria*. This was a car tour of Pretoria, guided by fictional characters.

When I think back to this time I am almost overwhelmed with thinking how to articulate how much was knitting together between all the different activities I was doing. For the purposes of this chapter, I want to draw out two key aspects of the second phase of the research in terms of PaR methods:

1. A development of specific methods for a participatory theatre and performance approach to exploring daily place-making activities in city spaces.
2. A development of devices for creating a site-specific theatre work to publicly share the findings coming out of the methods developed in point one.

In terms of point one above, there were many general methods I knew I would be using in the theatre and performance-making process of the research: prompts and exercises for devising oral, physical, textual theatrical material. However, this phase was about finding the specific nature of these general theatre-making tools to serve the particularities of the research.

I was invested in understanding cities through a lens of relational becoming. In other words, that through the relationships between people, things, objects and cityscape, the city is ever in the making and emergent. This is what made Ingold's notion of corresponding with the world so fitting (2013). If I was to understand something of the relationally emergent nature of a particular city space in a particular time, framing the 'getting to know' as a relationship, as a correspondence, mirrored my sense of the nature of cities and their making. Using this methodological framework, the first theatre-making approach I tested was to frame the devising process as a container for allowing participants to develop their own correspondence with cities.

In the Braamfontein Saturday Project, I offered prompts to get participants observing and interacting with Braamfontein and then asked them to create artistic responses to their experiences using their preferred artistic medium. This produced a range of material: a short documentary, a balsa wood sculpture, installations, photographs, performance interventions. In the work with the University of Pretoria students, they had several small tasks to design performance works in relation to different public sites we explored in Pretoria. With all of them being Drama students, all these works were performance-based but expressed the particular thematic and aesthetic concerns that made up each student's particular artistic voice. In the case of both projects, I curated all these different artistic 'correspondences' with city spaces into final public showings: an exhibition for the Braamfontein project and a play for the Pretoria one. Figuring my theatre-making as a correspondence with city, these two projects helped to test, refine and affirm a performance devising approach that would facilitate the correspondence of other theatre-makers/artists with the city.

Within this broader realisation of 'correspondence' with the city through a theatre-making approach, I developed exercises on a more micro level to serve city space and place explorations. Early on in both projects I started to work with the senses, asking participants to notice and document all they smelt, heard, saw, tasted and the textures

they touched or could imagine touching in city spaces. It is hard to remember now how conscious this use of the senses was. I suspect it was at that stage mostly intuitive, though of course it fitted so well with all the urban and place theory I was reading and came to read over the subsequent years: Kathleen Stewart (2012, 2007), Arjun Appadurai (2015), Tim Cresswell (2004), Doreen Massey (2005), Nigel Thrift (2008) and Thrift and Ash Amin (2002). All our relations are mediated through our senses, and attending to them gives specific and evocative information on the materiality of actions and relations and the affectual charge they carry.

Telling Mark Fleishman about my work with the senses and using the term 'synesthesia', prompted him to recommend Josephine Machon's (*Syn*)aesthetics: *redefining visceral performance* (2011), in which she talks about how immersive theatre works place audiences in an affectually charged state through how they combine and blur the senses. Reading Machon's work inspired me to develop the sense exercises further, asking project participants to list the senses they associated with a place and to then find synesthetic expressions and representations of these. I would ask participants to imagine smelling a sight and let that smell affect a physical gesture through their bodies or to create a texture you could touch that might represent a sound and so on. I used this exercise throughout my PhD, and continue to use it in place explorations. It offers a deep engagement with the sensory material of place to open up the possibilities for a creative correspondence as place-learning process.

## SYNAESTHETIC EXERCISE

This practical exercise was developed by Alex as a way of exploring place through the senses, inspired by Josephine Machon theory of (syn)æsthetic performance (2011).

1. Spend half an hour in a place or spend five minutes carefully imagining yourself in a place you are familiar with.
2. Make headings with the name of each sense: sights, smells, sounds, tastes, textures. You can add more senses: proprioception, balance – get creative with what might count as a sense.
3. Under each heading take 1 minute (or more) to list all the things in the place you explored that fall under that sense, in other words all the things you saw, smelt, heard, touched, tasted. Some of these sensory experiences might require a little imagination. For example, you might not have tasted anything, but you could imagine what tar on the road might taste like.
4. Looking at each list, now find ways of expressing one sense with another sense. You might draw an image for a sound or make a static physical image for a smell or a gesture for a touch.



Figure 16.1: Making a Braamfontein soundscape. Left to right: Shameelah Kahn, Nokuthula Mkwanzazi, Jenni-Lee Crewe, Nondumiso Msimanga. Photograph by Frances Slabolepszy.



Figure 16.2: Bridge and Juta Street installation by Jenni-lee Crewe. Photograph by Frances Slabolepszy.



Figure 16.3: Visual representation of the smell of fire and cooking meat. Produced through an exercise to express experiences of Braamfontein synesthetically. Photograph by Frances Slabolepszy.



Figure 16.4: Marie Fricourt mapping her daily journey through Braamfontein on the studio window. Photograph by Frances Slabolepszy.

Coming now to point two of the key aspects in this second phase of my research, in much the same way that I had a general sense that I would be using theatre-making methods, I had a general sense that the artistic product of my research would be a site-specific theatrical performance. The question was: what kind of site-specific theatrical performance? What aesthetic and dramaturgical choices would I make to serve the research? These answers emerged entirely through the doing. With the notion of both corresponding and facilitating others' correspondence with the city through theatre/ art-making, came the sense of myself as a curator in the first project, and a dramaturge in the second. The first project affirmed a sense of my role in the final product being one of drawing different offerings together. In the second project this was more specifically focused through theatre as a medium: how might I create a play as a container for all the performances, characters, writing for performance and concepts the performers had created? In dialogue with the students, but with me bringing more of my own aesthetic

sensibilities and thematic interests into play, we crafted a theatrical experience through which we could weave together much of the material the students had devised in our exploration of Pretoria.

These two projects offered an overall sense that my correspondence through theatre-making in the research process would come through facilitation and dramaturgy, but the second project in particular offered useful structuring techniques for a final performance that could reflect the findings of the participatory theatre-making process in relation to city spaces. The defining features of this were: to structure a final play on the format of a tour, to use fictional tour guide characters to offer narratives of place and senses of people from that place, and to set within this structure more abstracted performance events along the route that evoked different qualities and experiences of that place.



Figure 16.5: *Opsoek/ Descoberta/ Finding Pretoria* poster made up of layered images from the making process. Poster design by Alex Halligey.

### **REFINING METHODS, ITERATING AND REITERATING FOR A SPECIFIC PLACE**

Walking, interviewing, doing an art historical review of public art in Johannesburg and engaging in Johannesburg's public cultural life in the inner city, led me to settle on the area of Bertrams, Lorentzville and Judith's Paarl as the place where I would initiate the core PaR project of my PhD. As it evolved the project came to run from October 2015 to December of 2016, although I continued to run participatory drama workshops with one of the institutions in the area, Bienvenu Refugee Shelter for Women and Children, until December 2019.





Figures 16.6 and 16.7: 2015 at Gerald Fitzpatrick House and Nursing Home (left) and Maurice Freeman recreation centre (right), part of the initial 6-week set of workshops. Photographs by Baeletsi Tsatsi.



Figure 16.8: Bertrams Junior School in July 2016, part of weekly workshops that ran from October 2015 to December 2016. Photograph by Baeletsi Tsatsi.



Figure 16.9: Fabric painting 'home' with Bienvenu Refugee Shelter women and children, March 2019. Weekly mixed arts-based works that started in October 2015 and carried on to December 2019, beyond the end of the official PhD PaR in December 2016. Photograph by Alex Halligey.

As with the second phase, I was still reading, writing, interviewing and walking the city. I presented at two conferences and one summer school in the middle of this 2015 to 2016 period, and those were new methods which offered a kind of scholarly public dialogue with my work I had not encountered yet. And again, as with the second phase, the ways in which writing and reading were practices, and theatre-making was developing theory and all the ways in which I was 'working with the material' of cities, theatre and performance, participatory democratic processes and the specificity of Bertrams, Lorentzville and Judith's Paarl were constantly weaving together into knowing and interpretations at the nexus of the urban and theatre and performance theory and practice. However, if the

defining characteristic of phase one was practice to develop a methodology and of phase two was practice to develop methods, this phase, phase three, was practice to know a specific place. This involved iterative practices on a macro level:

1. An initial six-week set of participatory theatre and performance-based workshops with four institutions in the area, exploring participants' experiences of the area.
2. A longer phase of participatory theatre and performance-based workshops with two institutions in the area.
3. The making of a site-specific play in the area, *Izithombe 2094*.
4. The making of a history play of the area with the Bertrams Junior School group, performed at the school and a local, community cricket ground.
5. Coming to a decision in dialogue with the Bertrams Junior School principal and the Bienvenu Refugee Shelter managers and residents to respectively, conclude the 'drama' workshops with the Bertrams Junior School Grade 5s and 6s and continue the weekly workshops with the Bienvenu women and their children.

And it involved iterative practices on a micro level:

1. Putting into practice the specific devising (theatre-making process) and dramaturgical (realising a final product) methods I had developed in the second phase.
2. Adjusting these methods according to how the participants responded to them. This included developing different iterations of the methods for different groups and different iterations of the different methods through the process with each group. In other words, I needed to adapt the methods differently for Bertrams Junior School Grade 5s and 6s compared to the adaptations I made for the women and their children from Bienvenu Refugee Shelter. But I also needed to keep adapting the methods with both groups of participants as our explorations evolved.
3. In dialogue with the workshops there was an ongoing adaptation of the interviews I was doing with people who lived or had lived in the area, my own participant-observation practices as someone renting an artist's studio in the area and volunteering as a gardener at the local inner city farm, and all that I was reading and writing.
4. Adapting the methods in the work with the Bienvenu residents for a longer-term engagement beyond the focus of the PhD work.

The longish term, iterative nature of working with these practices in the Bertrams,

Lorentzville and Judith's Paarl area enabled a complex, layered knowledge of the place – of the area's 2015/ 2016 moment. However, it also produced a detailed and evolving understanding of what theatre and performance brought to the knowing of a city space, and how a city space proposed meaningful use of theatre and performance as concepts and as artistic practices.



Figure 16.10: The audience carrying 'the sea' down Thames Street, Bertrams, in a performance of *Izithombe 2094* in September 2016. Photograph by Baeletsi Tsatsi.



Figure 16.11: Baeletsi Tsatsi as 'Sister Bae', tour guide and storyteller, in a performance of *Izithombe 2094* in September 2016. Photograph by Alex Halligey.



Figure 16.12: Toni Morkel (with the umbrella) as 'Mrs Liebenberg', fictional City Of Johannesburg official from the 1980s, in a performance of *Izithombe 2094* in August 2016. Photograph by Baeletsi Tsatsi.



Figure 16.13: Lindiwe Matshikiza as 'Sylvie', fictional Francoophone Bertrams resident, in a performance of *Izithombe 2094* in August 2016. Photograph by Baeletsi Tsatsi.



Figure 16.14: Lindiwe Matshikiza (left) as Shaun and Toni Morkel as Battery, in a performance of *Izithombe 2094* in August 2016. Photograph by Baeletsi Tsatsi.

## **ARTICULATING THE PaR**

The fourth and final, as far as there can be a final phase of research, was the writing up of my thesis. Although writing was a key 'method as practice' from the beginning of the research process, in this phase it was the central practice. My PhD was examined conventionally on the basis of an 80 000-word thesis, as opposed to a PaR PhD which would have been examined by some form of adjudication of the participatory theatre as a public art project and on the basis of a 40 000-word written reflection on the practice. I chose to be examined on an 80 000-word thesis partly because it was easier than navigating the logistical difficulties of having three examiners, two of whom would need to be based overseas, see the theatre-making work. However the main reason was because writing to synthesise scholarly theory and theatre-making practice had been integral as a practice in the research process. I wanted the size of writing a full thesis, in the time and words it would take, as a practice to conclude and make sense of the research process as a whole.

Although there was a great deal of conscious consideration throughout the research, nonetheless much of what was happening was driven by intuitive, libidinous impulses (see Knorr Cetina, 2006:186 on the libidinous nature of PaR). I was following hunches, threads of connections between what inspired me in, for example, an urban theorist's thinking, a creative proposal in a rehearsal and an everyday, embodied, affectual experience on a Johannesburg street. Writing the remaining chapters of the thesis on the Bertrams, Lorentzville and Judith's Paarl project and revisiting the first two chapters I had already written (literature review and methodology, case study of two Johannesburg public artworks) was a process of bringing to consciousness those connections and hunches. The sense-making and articulation of what I had been learning through all the previous two-and-a-half years emerged through the writing. I made a provisional plan for the remaining chapters on the Bertrams, Lorentzville and Judith's Paarl project, and a provisional plan for the structure of each chapter, but what each chapter became, how they worked together and how I concluded the thesis all emerged through the writing (typing) and the routes that it led back to readings, notes and memories from the entire journey of the PhD project, right back to when it started with Sara Matchett's and The Mothertongue Project's *Breathing Space* in 2005.

## **PaR AFTER THE PaR**

Writing the thesis and even the essentially bureaucratic process of submitting it for examination, and responding with revisions to the examiners' feedback, gave a sense of closure to the project. Yet, Henk Borgdorff's assertion that artistic research is never finished (2012:11) has only been borne out in what I have seen in my work since 2018, when my PhD was officially concluded. Some of these iterations of the work beyond the end were more directly related to the PhD project than others. With funding from Rand Merchant Bank, handled by The Mothertongue Project as a holding Non Profit Organisation, I was able to run weekly arts-based workshops at Bienvenu with paid student facilitators from the Market Theatre Laboratory and Wits School of the Arts and arts facilitator mentors, both independent practitioners and practitioners from The Hillbrow Theatre Foundation, Drama for Life, and Wits School of the Arts. Footage from the *Izithombe 2094* playmaking

process was eventually turned into a short documentary. I ran theatre and performance-based workshops with informal traders in the Bertrams, Lorentzville and Judith's Paarl area, as part of a project called Maker's Valley<sup>41</sup>



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Video 16.1: Documentary on the playmaking process of *Izithombe 2014* – [here](#). Videography by Palesa Shongwe, video editing by Dominique Little.

Other less direct iterations are still resonating through my work today, as I continue to work with 'thinking through making' and the notion of correspondence as methodology. I have continued to use and develop synaesthetic place exploration methods in a range of research contexts and through sharing them with undergraduate and postgraduate students and early career researcher colleagues. Using my theatre and performance-making practice works in conjunction with what I read; and synthesising these two practices through the practice of writing continues to serve my fascination with space and place. I get more and more sense of how valuable this concert of practices is to my entwined artistic and research interests. I am more able to articulate them even as they seem ever more alchemical and magical.

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41 Link to the Maker's Valley website: <https://www.makersvalley.org.za/>.

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