

Interpellation and *The House* Rehearsal Room: Or, Why Conversations like 'Digging Deep' Matter

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While sifting through the documents that constitute *The House* portfolio, I recognized my own internalised Data Protector/Accountant cautioning me to parse the items carefully and methodically in order to make sense of *The House* portfolio's research processes and its outputs. While this harbinger of institutional malaise urged me to view the portfolio in quantifiable gains and definitive outcomes, 'Digging Deep' - the dialogue between Hughes (the AHRC-funded researcher) and Waterfield (the AHRC-funded artist) – served as call to arms for the more nascent musings that emerge from practice-as-research collaborations. We are still in the process of finding the words to talk about practice-as-research. Our language is still catching up.

Institution-based arts researchers strain against evaluative systems such as The Research Excellence Framework (REF), the system by which the government assesses the quality of research in UK higher education, with its star ratings and impact scores. Freelance artists and employees of Arts Council funded organisations alike weave intricate promises of engagement plans and audience development strategies in order to perform their value. We are all doing our 'steps'. As someone who works across the worlds of academia and freelance arts practice, I find myself constantly negotiating my own working conditions – even (and especially) if this negotiation happens *with myself*. Should I check my university emails on the days I'm not in? If I pay myself a flat fee from my own Arts Council grant, how do I decide if that fee is fair? How can I reconcile myself with the well-intentioned fictions of grant applications past, once time and space have wrought havoc on project planning?

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As Althusser recognised, ideology (in this portfolio's case, the noxious waves of neoliberalism and its concomitant austerity hangover) does not pour down on us from up on high like acid rain. Rather, ideology is bred from and reproduced by individual interactions and made up of moments wherein we recognise and re-play ourselves in the institutional roles of everyday life (Althusser 1984, 40, 47). These quotidian moments *create* ideology. 'Digging Deep' is important precisely because of both participants' perspectives on these roles. Hughes incessantly questions her own position of relative economic and institutional privilege in the project in relation to Waterfield's more precarious, fee-for-service one, as well as how this position affects research outcomes of *The House*. Meanwhile, Waterfield refuses to occupy the position of 'poor artist' peacefully, reiterating her agency at every turn in terms of her studio rehearsal schedule and her refusal to let academia's *logos* do the talking for her. Neither seems particularly at ease with the financial position into which the project puts her, but in this dialogue – just one of many, we are sure – they have found a kind of shared vernacular. Both feel pressure to do their best, to show they're not getting 'something for nothing' – and yet both strain against this very performance anxiety.

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Not sure ...

Waterfield's body-based practice is a particularly interesting counterpoint to Jenny's scholarly voice. Here we have an artist for whom language can be a partial means of incantation, certainly, but never the whole package. Her live performance of *The House* is a testimonial to the radical untranslatability of physical theatre, its refusal to be subservient to the written or spoken word. As I watched the performance at the University of Salford, I felt students and staff reacting physically to Waterfield's demeanor; we squirmed with those alchemical reverberations that come from witnessing complete physical commitment onstage. 'Words are visceral, they're full of body,' she tells us, just as she questions the prioritization of writing over performance in the academy. Meanwhile, Hughes's scholarly contribution shines through in the dialogue and surrounding documents and proves that archival and contextual research can be complementary to physical exploration, illuminating aspects of process that lay hidden otherwise. As such, this portfolio stages the bipolarity of practice-as-research across two participants' experiences. On one end *ludus*, the other *logos*: play and argument, when twinned and twined together through dialogue, can reveal

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the 'praxis' heralded by Nelson as a 'dialogic engagement' between theory and practice (2013, 33).

Arts workers across the UK are moving from freelance, project-based labour towards the apparently stable shelter of academia – 'getting on a new kind of funding bandwagon,' as Waterfield suggests. Academic institutions are gobbling them up in hopes of industry connections. What do we lose by engaging in these instrumentalisations? What do we give up in our readiness to take on the mantle of another system of valuation? And, perhaps most importantly, what knowledges remain invisible even under this academic fetishisation of professional artists' haptic and heretofore tacit knowledges? Theatre and performance scholars (and scholars across the humanities) must continue to stretch their language as Hughes has done here, and artists must continue to stand up for practice's own 'know-how' or 'insider' knowledge as Waterfield has (see Nelson 2013, 37). This collaboration is more powerful precisely for its staging of a practice-as-research enquiry across multiple positions; while most individual 'practitioner-researchers' must perform (sometimes literally) multiple modes of epistemological knowledge across one project, Waterfield and Hughes have circumnavigated this problem by engaging in parallel endeavours. Waterfield's experience in the field of physical theatre and Hughes's recognition of this expertise fly in the face of what Lyn Gardner (2016) has called out as the theatre industry's obsession with the 'new' or 'emerging' artist. The collaboration itself *is part of* the practice-as-research and tracks the development of each participant's understanding of the subject matter according to the other *as well as her understanding of the other's position*. In this way, the dialogue 'Digging Deep' is one of both interpellation and its refusal, as both participants refuse to be subsumed into their roles. It allows us to see the connections between both participants' experiences – both have felt the Matron's beady gaze as they 'sing for their suppers'.

'The researcher and the artist' reads like an Aesop fable gone wrong. Thankfully, Hughes's and Waterfield's dialogue provides an uplifting moral: practitioners and researchers both go through 'steps' as part of articulating their work's value, but academic institutions can literally and figuratively provide an agonistic space for discussion, play and disagreement. As readers, we have the opportunity to take 'Digging Deep' as a model for the fragile possibilities found in constantly negotiating the position of practice-as-research in relation

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to both the arts and academic 'industries'. Rather than feel polarized by our differing methodological approaches, we as practitioners and scholars should challenge ourselves to engage in rigorous dialogues in and outside of the rehearsal room. These inchoate conversations are often where the work truly lives.

References:

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Gardner, L., 2016. The perils of being theatre's next big thing. *Guardian*, 2 August [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/aug/02/the-perils-of-being-theatres-next-big-thing-artist-development> [Accessed 3 October 2016]

Nelson, R., 2013. *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.