ESF II: Augmenting Impact with Social Media

Lead Academic: Dr. Misha Myers, Falmouth University

This project explores how social media can be employed effectively to understand, document and develop the long-term impact of performance work that takes place outside the traditional context and conventions of the theatre space? By its nature this work is extended and dispersed and the long lasting impacts it can have on the people and communities that take part can often be difficult to document. The project seeks to develop and enquire how user-generated content can be employed to not only facilitate further participation in the co-authorship of such performance work, but trace the long tail of the work and it's impact on the communities and individuals that take part in its making.

Social media is increasingly being used by theatre companies to capture immediate audience feedback using sms texting, twitter, Facebook and there is some existing experimentation with using social media to involve audiences in devising work, such as Ampersand’s scratch performance Storylines. The aim of this project is to look at the range of existing practice using social media to capture audience engagement both in the making and receiving of site-specific and community-based work to develop a practical toolkit for managing that experience effectively. This toolkit will integrate marketing, documentation and creative devising practices. The project will explore this question in partnership with Wildworks theatre, who are renown for their work in found landscapes and for performances made with host communities from which they draw their meaning. With the company’s past projects spin off theatre companies or other related initiatives have developed out of their work. The platform created through this research project aims to capture the legacy building of Wildworks' processes in terms of the sustained relationships that develop through their work – between partner venues, participants, audiences and future producing models. It will also benefit those spin off initiatives and companies by providing them with the opportunity to piggyback and build their own profile, reputation and impact through WildWorks own platform, creating a wider network that is a living and growing system.

The project builds upon the lead academic’s expertise in creating located, participatory and digital performance that uses interactive media and bridges ethnography with creative practice. Together with a technologist, they will design a social media platform that Wildworks and other performance companies may use to document and develop the impact of their past and future works.

The project will evaluate the digital platform created to articulate a toolkit or methodological framework of approaches that can be used by other companies as a sustainable model for maintaining relationships with communities, generating new audiences, and assessing and demonstrating the long-term impact of their work. This toolkit will be disseminated as a published article at the culmination of the project. It would submitted to the Journal of Arts & Communities, which the lead academic has been
invited to contribute to in the past and would be read by other artists and companies working in related fields of participatory arts and performance. It will be published online via the Performance Centre and Articulating Space Research Centre websites and an announcement of its publication will be circulated via various artists network mailing lists.

A Research Assistant with particular expertise and knowledge of social media will work closely with the lead academic and Wildworks to co-author the final outcome of the research.

This research seeks to resolve the developing problem of how to preserve the ephemeral, unscripted performance - often associated with participatory theatre - outlined in Taylor’s work *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2002). This research will aid long-term preservation and assessment through deliberately facilitated social media, an emerging practice. Creating an online community is a natural step for a company such as WildWorks, whose practice focuses on creating participatory theatre with communities that often results in groups forming out of the work and continuing after the work has finished across social media platforms, as demonstrated during their productions of *The Passion of Port Talbot* and *Babel*. This research will significantly aid WildWorks in using social media to their advantage by drawing on the work of other companies such as Coney and Goat & Monkey, Mercurial Wrestler who produce participatory theatre, which merges interaction between online and live performance.

The research will also investigate social media as a form of participation in itself. Key to understanding how social media can be participatory is the white paper *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture* (Jenkins, 2009), which examines different types of online interaction and also stresses the necessity of inclusivity when facilitating user-generated web content. *Here Comes Everybody* by Shirky (2008) is a more general examination of how social media is changing society, and provides solid contextual information.

While there has been sustained discourse on participation in the visual arts with Bishop’s *Participation* and Grant Kester’s *Conversation Pieces*, there has been limited discussion of contemporary approaches in participatory theatre with most attention given to participation in what is known as community theatre (Kershaw 1992). There is a clear opportunity here to not only address a practical issue confronting companies working outside of formal theatre spaces, but also to develop new digital practices in the field of participatory theatre. This research will draw on sources in the wider field of participation, and apply, challenge and develop them in response to contemporary developments in participatory theatre as seen in Performance Research (Vol 16, Issue 4), a special Issue focusing on participatory culture, to which the lead academic was a contributor and will employ and develop the six diverse audience typologies of audience engagement developed by Brown and Ratzkin (2011) to consider how this engagement is being augmented and transformed with new social media practices and what new business models and creative practices of marketing, documenting and engaging audiences social media offers for theatre companies working in dispersed contexts.

**Methodology:**

The methodology of this project will comprise of three interlinking steps: a methodological framework, from which a model of best practice will be drawn and practice led experimentation can be undertaken. The Methodological framework will cover:
• A familiarity with how participants naturally interact online by investigating Wildworks' previous performances and other comparable performances.

• Investigation into companies who use social media effectively as a networking tool or integrated into the performance.

• This methodological framework can then be used to:
  
  o Undertake practice led experimentation by creating a social media platform
  o Create a model of best practice, which will then be analysed and explained in the written publication.
  o

Relevant Academic Expertise

Dr. Misha Myers is a researcher and practitioner who creates digital, participatory and located performance. Her work bridges ethnography with creative practice and uses live, mediated and interactive storytelling to engage audiences and communities with complex social issues. She has developed innovative methods of performance that engage diverse groups of participants in co-authorship of the work through performative and interactive processes and a range of media to animate and story place. As part of the AHRC and British Council funded UnBox Fellowships and follow on funding Misha is developing a computer game with the Delhi-based non-profit organisation Digital Green to engage urban dwellers with issues facing farmers in India to promote awareness and empathy. A live action playtest of the game was trialed at the UnBox Festival in Delhi and the Alchemy Festival at the South Bank Centre in London and will be presented in a workshop and exhibition at the Mobility Futures conference at Lancaster University through the award of a Catalyst Arts Bursary.

Her recent work also includes the Walking Library, an ongoing art project created in collaboration with Dee Heddon and first commissioned for Sideways 2012 – a festival that walked 334km across Belgium and aimed to connect ecology and culture through using the 'slow ways' or 'slow paths' of Flanders. The Walking Library carries a curated library of books and facilitates a peripatetic reading group as it journeys, allowing engagement with and reflection on the library’s content, and some sketching with words or images. In her previous work way from home (2002-2008) refugees and asylum seekers across the UK were invited to share and represent their transnational experiences of place with public officials and other audiences through processes of walking, talking and mapping a remembered home into a present landscape. An outcome of this project was an interactive interface (www.wayfromhome.org), created in 2004 with technologists Dan Harris and Adam Child, using shockwave video to create an online audio-visual tour of the hand drawn way from home maps.