The value of being together? Audiences in Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*

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Abstract:
This article investigates the tensions surrounding the elements that are assigned most value in the construction and reception of performances by Punchdrunk. Using empirical investigation of the 'tactics and strategies' employed by twelve undergraduate spectators of *The Drowned Man*, as described and analysed through critical written responses, I concentrate on the value audiences place on the different experiences available in a Punchdrunk event. I argue that Punchdrunk performances are constructed to place the highest value on intimate human contact. This perpetuates the claims made for the live theatre event: that the sharing of a common time and space between actors and spectators is unique in creating community. However, this is problematised in Punchdrunk performances by the competitive experience of achieving these intimate encounters.

Keywords: Immersive theatre, intimate theatre, spectator participation as research, theatre audience, research methodology.

In the basement of the building is the Drafting Room, accessed only by those with a special key, obtained at a premium price of £85. This small, restricted space is furnished with old office furniture, the desk covered with papers, an old typewriter and a play text of *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner's. Isolated from the main performance spaces, it appears to be the one place from where it is possible to 'see' the whole performance, an opportunity denied to those paying the standard entry price of £49.50. On shelves are files marked with recognisable character names and on the wall is a grid which details every character, every event and every scene on the four floors of the performance. In front of the grid small models of people stand on architectural blueprint plans of each of the four

floors. I recognise some of this from my travels through the warehouse, both on this occasion and on a previous visit, although other parts are completely unfamiliar. I am approached by Phoebe, whom I have encountered briefly during the prologue especially reserved for premium ticket holders: she touches my shoulder gently to attract my attention and holds her balled fist out to me. I proffer my palm to receive the crumpled piece of paper, which I unfold. It reads: 'Go to the bar.' Phoebe nods and gestures first towards the grid, where a Perspex slide rule hovers over the current time, highlighting the Bar and the characters who will be there, and then she gestures towards the other side of the room where a short corridor leads between models of some of the desert scenes I have encountered and out, back into the dark corridors of the studio environment, back into the generally accessible parts of Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*.

I will return to the significance of the premium ticket later in this article. However, this short description of my experience of the premium ticket experience of *The Drowned Man*, encompasses some of the celebrated elements of Punchdrunk's work: the attention to detail of the scenery and environment, the air of mystery, and the blurring of the normally accepted lines of intimacy and engagement between performer and spectator. Punchdrunk's productions take place in large buildings converted into elaborate and minutely detailed sets within which performers present brief, fractured performances based on narratives from classic texts. Adapted elements of the original text are staged around this detailed set, with the narrative repeating two or three times during a performance depending on the production. Spectators enter the space at staggered times and are asked to wear white face masks which resemble Venetian carnival masks. They encounter the performances in a non-linear fashion.

The Drowned Man* was performed between June 2013 and July 2014 in an old Post Office building next to Paddington station in London, and took its narrative inspiration from Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck*. The narrative was staged in a building that the pre-publicity claimed had once been a British satellite of a Hollywood film studio, which mysteriously and suddenly closed in the 1960s. The production was set both in the offices of a film production company, and the set of the Western they were purportedly making at the time of the studio's demise.

I explore in this paper how Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* offers what Gareth White terms 'invitations to active participation or self-initiated participation' and how first-time spectators of Punchdrunk responded to these 'invitations' (White 2009, 221). I concur with White's argument that, whether these 'invitations' are present or not,

> [t]he powers to interpret, to take viewpoints and to shape experience are significant and interesting aspects of any audience experience, and present in all performance experiences. (ibid)

These 'powers' are similar to what Martin Barker calls 'viewing strategies' (2006). Here I assess the different strategies employed by spectators, examining what aspects of the experience are valued. Punchdrunk's performances are a valuable environment for such research because of their different and varied performances, including the ability they offer to examine at close quarters the scenery, which the spectator might only encounter at a distance during seated performances in purpose-built theatre venues. I move from considering responses to *The Drowned Man* in general to the specific one-to-one performances that some spectators experience.

Punchdrunk claim that their productions are 'a game-changing form of immersive theatre' that 'rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences' (Punchdrunk, 2013). Similarly, one-to-one performances, which might be encountered during Punchdrunk's productions, have been described by Dee Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan as having a 'perceived value [which] hinges on the seeming authenticity of exchange, on the engendering of a relationship between performer and performer-spectator' (2012: 121). In this way, they suggest, 'performance might, then, be situated as a "counterpublic" – a way of "rethinking intimacy"' in order to address

> anxieties over how – in a world of inter-racial and inter-ethnic conflict and global inequalities and injustices – we might live together, better. Performances of intimacy, in their very staging, seem to demand performances of trust, mutual responsibility, mutual openness and mutual receptiveness. In this, they correlate with a critical understanding of subjectivity, of 'being' as 'being-together' (2012: 126).

In the changed relationship between performer and spectator provided by one-to-one performance, Heddon *et al.* see an opportunity for constructing different human relationships to those configured by the demands of a post-modern world; relationships that might start in the performance space but extend beyond them.

In this paper I show that human contact is certainly valued in both the construction and reception of *The Drowned Man*. However, I also suggest that the human community – the 'being-together', to use Heddon *et al.*'s term – that is often claimed as unique to theatrical performance is problematic in a Punchdrunk performance. I argue that the human contact on offer during *The Drowned Man* actually encourages individualistic and competitive behaviour in a way that conflicts with the ideals of community and co-operation often claimed to be the result of theatrical performance.

'Fear and discomfort': accessing audience responses

In addition to my own experience of *The Drowned Man,* I use as a central element of this research the empirical investigation of the writings of twelve second-year undergraduate students on the BA (Hons) Drama degree at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) between October and December 2013. The sample was all female and contained five UK

residents, two European students enrolled on the degree and five US students spending a semester studying at QMUL. All students gave me permission to quote from their critical responses for this article, although I have anonymised them here by using initials.

These second year undergraduates had elected to enrol on a module called 'Spectatorship and Participation', which examines the role of audiences in theatre and performance from the early twentieth century to the present. Accompanying an examination of both historical and contemporary attempts by artists to engage spectators in different ways, students were asked to critically reflect on three experiences of disparate performance. Their writings on Punchdrunk were the third of these critical responses and were presented in a seminar setting before students were given the opportunity to re-draft their writing for submission as part of the assessment at the end of the module. For the Punchdrunk Critical Response, students were asked to describe and analyse their experience of the performance, with reference to the 'tactics and strategies' Gareth White suggests that spectators in Punchdrunk performances need to adopt to fully enjoy the 'isolated and disorientated [...] incoherent, anonymous' and 'escapist' experience (2009: 226).

White's description of the need to adopt 'strategies' as a spectator of any event echoes Barker's concept of a 'viewing strategy' as a '*motivated* activity' (Barker 2006: 9. Italics in original). This concept of spectating as a motivated and conscious activity is also present in the idea of 'Spectator Participation as Research (SPaR)' as described by Heddon *et al.* in their research into one-to-one performance. Heddon and her colleagues draw on the established methodology of Practice as Research in Performance Studies, an approach which is located in the experiential processes of those making performance and previously applied to, and by, practising artists and performance-makers in researching their own work. Heddon *et al*. extend this methodology to spectating, where 'the practice is located in the experiential processes of reception' (2012, 122).

I apply in this research the concept of SPaR because I believe its emphasis on the experience of the spectator in the performance event might be valuable in any performance, from one-to-one to large West End musicals. By expanding our understanding of participation and eschewing any false dichotomy between passivity and activity which the use of the verb 'participate' might suggest, we may practically invoke Jacques Rancière and his argument that spectators are always active, composing 'poems' in their heads, and actually begin to access these 'poems' (2009).

By consciously asking my students to attend performances whilst paying attention to their experience and to then write about this experience afterwards, I was consciously asking them to apply SPaR. SPaR is a methodology which can usefully expand the growing, but still under-developed, area of audience research in theatre, by emphasising the experience of the (ordinary) spectator. The work of scholars such as John Tulloch (2005) and Matthew Reason (2010) builds on the recognition that research on theatre reception has often, in the past, been restricted to 'professional' spectators, whether academics or professional reviewers for newspapers (Freshwater 2009; Heddon 2012; Reason 2006). While their work, mostly with young spectators, considers the experience of audiences other than experts, this has similar

groundings to SPaR in the way it takes seriously the task of recounting the experience of the 'non-professional' spectator.

To an extent, of course, it must be acknowledged that the students in my sample have clearly displayed a similar academic interest in the relationship between spectatorship and performance as other professional spectators, so their status here as 'ordinary' is not unproblematic. In addition, the context within which they were asked to produce written responses must be acknowledged in terms of the type of knowledge this might produce. The critical responses were written to be assessed after presentation in a seminar setting and subsequent re-drafting. The style of response produced – a written and composed essay – is therefore similar to that produced by professional spectators. Knowing that they would be expected to produce these critical responses after attending the performance would naturally have inflected the ways in which students approached the experience itself, especially as I had already suggested to them potential approaches related to escapism. However, I tried to construct the task with awareness of Rancière's notion that all spectators are constantly 'composing their own poems' in their heads as they view a cultural product. What I asked them to do was to reflect on this 'poem' after the event and to compose it into a critical response addressing their feelings within this space.

Having said this, many students engaged in this research reported taking pleasure in the performance outside the influence of the task. One student writes:

> Of course, I was not analysing [how an audience reacts to an interactive performer] during the actual performance, but rather in hindsight. At the time my main motivations were not scholarly but more fear and discomfort. (SY)

Most spectators of most performances will not produce 'texts' as a result of their viewing experiences unless they begin to become 'fans' of a particular genre or artist (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). My interest here was, partially, to prompt the production of text usually associated with fans. Some valuable work has begun to be conducted on fans of Punchdrunk, through, for example, research into online blogs and communities (Flaherty 2014) and also in the article in this themed section of *Participations*, on fan mail sent to Punchdrunk (Biggin 2015). Such work necessarily concentrates on those who have already formed a relationship with, and have invested emotionally and critically in, the work of Punchdrunk. This is not to suggest that fans are incapable of criticising Punchdrunk, but my interest here is in those who do not already have a 'fan' relationship with the company. My research therefore intends to extend and complement an understanding of Punchdrunk experiences beyond those who have been self-inspired to respond textually to their performances, as usefully explored by Biggin and Flaherty.

In this way, I hope that this research will contribute to an expanding range of studies of theatre audiences which might, eventually, lead to the establishment of some 'general principles'. I subscribe here to Frank Coppieters' notion of ethogenic research of audiences

by which 'general principles' emerge only through 'detailed particularistic studies'. Coppietiers cites the example of chemistry to support this approach:

> Chemical laws have emerged only after intensive study of hundreds of thousands of individual compounds to determine their composition, structure and mode of preparation. That is, as a result of both quantitative and qualitative work (1981: 35-6).

I offer this research as a study of an 'individual compound' of a particular audience experience. It is only by the practice and comparison of a range of detailed quantitative and qualitative work on audiences that it may be possible to challenge those such as Dennis Kennedy, who seem to reject the consideration of ordinary audience members because 'almost anything one can say about a spectator is false on some level' due to the 'highly individual and sometimes idiosyncratic ways' in which audiences respond to the same performance (2009: 188).

The desire for increasing intimacy

Aware perhaps that despite the very enthusiastic overall reception of Punchdrunk's previous works many were still confused about how to approach such a new phenomenon, Felix Barrett (Punchdrunk's Artistic Director) offered potential spectators of *The Drowned Man* the following tips to get the most from the performance:

1. Leave your friends behind and explore the building on your own – fortune favours the bold.
2. If you want action and story find a character and follow them.
3. If you want secrets and mystery follow your instincts and let the building guide you.
4. If a character looks you in the eye and takes your hand – go with them, you're in for a treat.
5. Be brave, the more curious you are, the more you'll discover.
6. Run, creep and glide through the building and let yourself get lost in a sea of ghosts.
7. Always trust Mr Stanford… (Barrett 2013, n.p.)

Barrett's claims for Punchdrunk performances emphasise a democratising approach, where each individual constructs their own narrative, 'like directing your own film' (Punchdrunk 2013). Barrett's emphasis here is that each spectator gets to choose what they experience and how they experience it: 'They are in charge' (Lukowski 2013).

Whilst this democratising approach certainly offers a myriad of individual options, two clear 'viewing strategies' are suggested by Barrett in tips 2 and 3: either to simply explore the building and the detailed scenery, or to follow a particular character as a means of

constructing a narrative. More experienced spectators of Punchdrunk performances describe these different strategies as 'the Search', the exploration of the many spaces provided, and 'the Tail', following a particular character through performance spaces to construct a narrative as they encounter other characters (Flaherty 2014).

For the students involved in this research, these 'search' and 'tail' strategies were, in the first instance, not used in isolation. Most combined these strategies, although as the event went on the majority of students increasingly adopted some form of the 'tail' strategy by following actors. However, all students make some reference in their critical responses to initial attempts to understand where and what the fictional surroundings represent by exploring the sets. NY describes this as trying to 'familiarise myself with my surroundings', whilst EI writes about 'trying to learn more about the world I was immersed in'. These attempts to understand their surroundings are hardly surprising given the combined disorienting effect of the masks and the environment. AN refers to the 'sensory overload' of *The Drowned Man*, 'with the detailed interactive scenery, pulsating music, and array of smells', whilst AT was 'so amazed by the environment that had been created that I spent a good chunk of time walking in and out of the meticulously designed sets, admiring the designer's handiwork'. AY describes a similar sense of amazement, 'being in awe of my surroundings'.

This sense of awe provoked uncomfortable feelings in many of the students. EN, for instance, 'felt lost and vulnerable [...] as if I had stepped into another world'. Similarly, RN framed her critical response with reference to 'Alice in a "Punchdrunk" Wonderland', and felt 'lost' in an 'overwhelming sense of being completely alone'. NE experienced a similar feeling of vulnerability and sought a 'sense of security' by 'following the fire exit signs', seemingly seeking an anchor of reality in this unfamiliar fictional environment. This feeling of security was, however, ultimately provided by human contact. She writes: 'The fire-exit signs eventually led me to a scene with two women. I was so relieved to see performers' that she began to follow the character Wendy. NE writes of 'quickly [becoming] very involved in Wendy's story' and following 'her so that I wouldn't be alone again'. Similarly, EI adopts the 'tail' strategy only once she has 'stumbled upon an actor' after loosely following the 'search' strategy. Once she does find an actor, however, EI 'decides to stick with him in an effort to understand the story'.

It is significant to note here that for most students the detailed set, whilst fascinating, does not contribute significantly to what they value about the performance. It is the narrative plot, provided by human actors, which is perceived as most valuable in this performance. As AN suggests, her interest quickly moves from amazement at the scenery to following actors in order 'to watch their stories unfold'. It is only once 'following an actor proved to be too difficult' that she 'would spend time looking more closely at the details of the sets until another character crossed my path whose story I could watch for a bit until I lost them within the chaos as well'. Similarly, once NE realises that the story is repeating, she makes the conscious decision 'to find a different character that interested me' rather than explore the scenery in more detail. Significantly, on a second visit to the performance, EI 'did not spend as

much time exploring empty rooms and examining objects because I wanted to fill in the parts of the plot that I did not understand'.

There is, in fact, an interesting hierarchy of human presence that emerges from these critical responses. Within the minutely detailed environments, the spectating of human performance may be seen in a number of guises. There are a range of big set-piece choreographed scenes, like the orgy in the basement studio or the cowboy hoe-down in the bar on the third floor that can be viewed by large crowds. Spectators of these performances are usually ushered subtly by actors into viewing positions around the perimeter of a loosely-defined performance area. Smaller encounters between two or more characters can also be witnessed in more intimate settings, which are only visible to smaller concentrations of spectators but allow close proximity between performers and spectators. These performances are largely wordless, or spoken in such soft voices that even those spectators standing closest might struggle to hear the words, and appear more as dance performances, emphasising the influential role of choreographer Maxine Doyle in the company. Lastly, there are the one-to-one performances between a character and a spectator.

It is these one-to-one performances that appear to be of highest value to most students. For instance, AY describes her desire to experience a one-to-one performance as follows: 'I had heard so much about it before hand I was pretty keen on having a one-to-one with an actor'. Some of the students involved in the research describe deliberately adopting tactics that sought to maximise their opportunity of receiving a one-to-one performance, either by following actors closely or by waiting in empty rooms for an encounter. Unexpectedly, the two students who wrote most assertively about their discomfort in the environment, and made no mention of attempting to attain a one-to-one performance, were the only ones of my sample to experience one. NE writes that

> About half way through the journey, Alice grabbed my hand, pulled me into a private room and locked everyone else out. She told me to sit down and she proceeded to tell me a story. Suddenly, she threw me up against a wall, took off my mask, stroked my arm and told me I was beautiful. She then pretended as though she were going to kiss me, but instead sniffed my face. Afterwards, she pushed me out of the private room with my mask. When she took off my mask, it reminded me of the distinction between the actors and myself. Although this individual experience made me feel more connected to Alice, the removing of the mask reminded me of the distinction between the actors and myself. I realized that, because my identity was concealed, I had been behaving in a way that I normally wouldn't.

AN experienced two one-to-one performances and indicates how she 'felt an immediate connection to whichever character removed my mask; I was no longer anonymous to them, I was an individual'. Thus, it seems that it is the sense of personal 'connection' to characters as an individual, as *themselves*, which is valued by these students.

It is not possible here to draw solid conclusions about why students valued the possibility of the one-to-one performance so highly. However, it would appear that the value attributed to them is linked to the restricted availability of such performances – not everyone gets one – and, in addition, that there is a perceived authenticity about involving the spectator '*personally*'.

The removal of the mask during such performances also seems paramount in this perception. As indicated by both AN and NE, the removal of the mask was seen as restoring to them an individuality that was previously lost during the performance. EN describes 'a *horde* of masked audience members', whilst AE's description of '*herds* of spectators' (my emphases) seems not only to deny individuality to audience members but also to deny their humanity. Significantly, EN has also worked as one of the black-masked stewards who staff the performance, mostly in order to prevent entrance to the few forbidden areas, and writes of how company members refer to the audience 'as simply "the White-masks"'. She analyses this attitude as summing up 'perfectly the anonymising effect the mask has on the audience, both enhancing the escapist element and highlighting the power divide between performer and audience'. This power divide is, I argue, based on a sense of individual humanity. The performers, who wear no masks, are clearly individual characters, whereas the spectators, encouraged to act as individuals, are literally faceless parts of a greater whole. During a one-to-one performance, however, it is possible for the individual spectator to display their face and regain a sense of individual humanity.

'Play the role you are given'

This perception of a change in the power relationship between performer and spectator would seem to support Felix Barrett's claims for Punchdrunk's performances as radically different to other forms of theatre, offering a more democratic approach. Rather than be granted a better, more privileged view of the performance through wealth or greater income, as is the case with price stratified seating in conventional theatre venues, here it is the 'bravest' who gain the most valued parts of the performance rather than the richest.

However, this argument is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, in performances of *The Drowned Man* Punchdrunk introduced a non-democratic aspect to the very fabric of their shows. As described in my opening paragraph, premium price tickets allowed access to parts of the performance denied to others. Indeed, the interaction with Phoebe was not only similar to a one-to-one performance, but her guidance and the contents of the room give the premium ticket holder an overview of the performance space that allows them to find the human performances valued by the students in this research without needing to explore the labyrinthine construction of the space.

Secondly, the sense of 'bravery' that is 'necessary' to achieve the desired one-to-one performance, promoted explicitly by Barrett in his description of how Punchdrunk productions should be approached, problematizes the claim of providing a democratic agency for spectators. This seems to perpetuate the dichotomy between the 'contemplative spectator' of visual art and the 'brave', 'participative spectator' that Carl Lavery discusses in

his conversation with Lone Twin (2011). In this article, Lavery explains how Lone Twin recognise that to achieve real disturbance of the power relationship between performer and spectator, any 'offerings' of participation made to a spectator must include the possibility of the spectator refusing this opportunity.

Many students described the sense that a new power relationship between performer and spectator was offered in *The Drowned Man*. Again, this different relationship was often related to the mask. Some took advantage of the perceived anonymity to get closer to the performers. For instance, NY writes that 'acceptable behavior at a theatre event was completely lost', and speaks of finding 'myself edging closer and closer to [the actors], wanting to see the expression on their faces, wanting to be just a breath away. Why? Because I could'. Similarly, EI leans 'on an actor's shoulder so that I could read a note he was writing'. Significantly, she writes that 'I do not think I would have done these things if I had not felt protected by the mask'.

However, others perceive such action as 'taking the anonymity of the masks to the extremes; following actors a bit too closely and trying to become a character in the performance', as AY writes. AN expresses disgust at the behaviour of other audience members, interpreting their transgression of *any* boundaries between performer and audience as desperation for one of the one-to-one performances:

> I looked on in complete shock at an audience member sitting on an actor's lap completely of their own accord, and a masked figure sitting in a car next to a 'dead' actor without being prompted and felt disgust that an audience member could be that desperate for a performance, they would invade the space under the anonymity of a mask.

Thus, whilst the students in the research recognised that they were allowed an increased amount of access, they were also well aware that the power in the performance still lay with the performers. EN was also an usher for the production, and writes of becoming aware of 'how willingly [many audience members] subject themselves to the demands of the show'. She attributes this to the mask which made her 'as clumsy as the rest', becoming 'nothing but a pair of eyes floating around the space ready to be pushed or pulled in any direction'. Her description of this experience highlights the perceived similarity to a conventional theatre production, as she becomes nothing but eyes gazing at a scene in front of her.

Similarly, any freedom this performance appears or claims to offer is questioned ultimately by AY:

> Even though it is participatory theatre, ultimately the actors rule the show and as a spectator you play along and do as you're told. If you don't follow the rule then issues begin to occur and you will ruin the show for everyone else. If you really wish to play a role then play the role you are given; the role of spectator.

There is an acceptance here that, for the 'show' to succeed, there are still rules which must be followed. They may be different from a conventional theatre performance, but the power still lies with the performer: 'ultimately the actors rule the show'. The student here seems to accept the role of a 'dutiful spectator' (Heddon 2012 et al), one who will be guided by the performer's prompts even if these might contradict any stated rules of engagement.

Indeed, this produces a tension at the heart of the experience for many students, who seem to initially seek any human contact as a form of security in numbers in an intimidating environment. It was not only performers who provided this sense of security. To combat her feeling of loneliness, AN initially adopted a strategy 'to move self-consciously and in complete terror around the set until I found other audience members to latch onto. It was then I gained confidence in thinking that if other people are confident in moving about without fear, then I should be too'.

However, as they seek the 'authentic' human contact of the one-to-one, students progressively seem to experience other human spectators as an annoyance and a distraction. Many of the students write of the physical exertion necessary to follow one character's plot in *The Drowned Man*. AN describes her attempt to 'successfully keep up with a performer' as 'often [requiring] running and pushing my way through the crowds of other spectators who were trying to do the exact same thing'. EI describes similar activity in following the character Frankie. She writes of having to

> manoeuvre around other audience members so that I could see him. I began to feel competitive towards the other spectators. I started to anticipate which way Frankie might exit a scene so that I could be the first person to follow him.

This produces a tension between the individual and the crowd whereby, as blogger Matthew Cook states: 'It is the audience [...] who provide the constant sense of unease'. Cook attributes this unease to spectators being so

> [i]ntent on squeezing every last drop from the experience we swarm greedily after performers and loom ominously on the periphery of the interplay. More than once I was caught in a tussle to catch a dramatic exchange and there was something undeniably menacing about our collective voyeurism (2013, n.p.).

Like Cook, the students identify discomfort at the amount of competition that the arrangement of human performances in *The Drowned Man* encourages. Such competition for the limited human performances, whether the restricted one-to-one performances or the restricted space available to get a good viewpoint of the larger set-pieces, further indicates the higher value placed on these performances compared to the exploration of the intricate sets.

Blank Tiles

As I have suggested in the introduction to this paper, theatre is often perceived as a peculiarly and uniquely communal activity which can ameliorate the negative pressures of the post-modern condition. Heddon *et al*. indeed describe one-to-one performance as an opportunity to establish a 'counterpublic' through challenging dominant understandings of human relationships in a post-modern world, by establishing an intimacy requiring 'trust, mutual responsibility, mutual openness and mutual receptiveness' (2012: 126).

However, the critical responses of the students in this research suggest that this understanding is problematic, at least with regards to the performances available in Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*. Their reflections acknowledge the authenticity and intimacy achieved in one-to-one performances, but also describe behaviour that is consistent with exactly that competitive individualism intimate performances supposedly challenge. Any human intimacy, valued as representative of human community, is in tension with the tactics and activities that seem necessary to experience one-to-one performance in a Punchdrunk production. The competition with other spectators, the pushing and shoving to attain prime position, is redolent of an individualism that actually prevents communal feeling. Rather than pursuing the common activity of watching a performance, the pursuit of 'trying to do the exact same thing' (AN) as other spectators results in, as EI writes, a 'competitive' feeling towards other spectators. Instead of providing an escape from the anxieties of modern life, as Heddon describes the potential benefits of one-to-one performances, or offering a model through which we might indulge in 'being together' outside the performance, the pursuit of valued intimate performances in fact replicates these competition and anxieties.

It is important to recognise, of course, that the one-to-one performances that a spectator may encounter during a Punchdrunk performance occur within a completely different context than the performances described by Heddon *et al*. As Eirini Kartsaki *et al.* point out: 'One-to-one performance comes in many guises – it may appear highly constructed, with immersive design, theatricality and heightened aesthetics, or it may present itself as some form of creative adaptation of the notion of encounter' (2012: 101). Without explicitly stating it, Kartsaki *et al*. suggest a continuum along which one-to-one performances might be placed, and it seems clear that Punchdrunk's one-to-one performances are closer to the highly aesthetic and clearly fictional end of this continuum.

In contrast, the performances described and analysed by Heddon *et al.* occur toward the opposite end of the spectrum. These are performances that seek to 'harness the sense of everyday exchange in a one-to-one interaction' and which seem to interrogate much more closely notions of truth in performance (Kartsaki 2012: 101). These performances are 'part of a wider group of UK-based Live Art and performance practitioners' (Heddon 2012: 120). Moreover, the performances are closely linked with academia: Heddon *et al*'s research occurred at a symposium at Glasgow University as the culmination of Adrian Howells' creative arts fellowship. Helen Iball describes Howells' work as a 'paradigm' of the new concerns that arise from one-to-one performances, because it was 'subject to scrutiny using established processes of ethical review' (Iball 2012: 42).

Clearly, although co-produced by the National Theatre, a partially state-funded body, Punchdrunk's *Drowned Man* was not of the same order as the one-to-one performances researched by Heddon *et al. The Drowned Man* has not been the subject of any academic ethical review, and rather than waiting to enter a space aware that they would receive a one-to-one performance, as occurs at the festivals at Battersea Arts Centre, for example, Punchdrunk's audience enter into a highly artificial and overtly fictional environment, with any one-to-one encounter positioned as part of this fiction.

It may be argued, then, that the individualistic behaviour seemingly encouraged in *The Drowned Man* is a product of the changing contexts of Punchdrunk's work. Punchdrunk's performance practices were originally cited as one of the 'outside', 'fringe' companies that were praised for 'infiltrating the mainstream' and breaking 'down all the old divisions between theatre and live art, the playhouse and the gallery, the text and the visual and the physical' (Gardner 2007, np). As their performances have entered the mainstream, their ability to provide performances that ameliorate the extremes of the post-modern condition are lessened, partly because audiences are aware that an hierarchy of experiential prestige is available in the performance space, but only to those 'brave' enough to find them.

Even within the one-to-one performances that occur within a live art context, Heddon *et al*. suggest that some are more effective than others at achieving a 'counterpublic'. Rather than all one-to-one performances being equally 'co-created, co-manufactured and indeed co-dependent', as Brian Lobel describes one-to-one performances, Heddon *et al.* complain that some of these performances require the spectator only to 'complete' the performance because 'the performance was already written' (Heddon *et al*, 2012: 129). This is also the case in *The Drowned Man*. Whether a spectator is addressed in the main performance space or individually in a one-to-one performance, the script is already written and there is a disparity between the performer who has a script and the spectator who has none. The spectator has a very limited role in completing the exchange. The role of the spectator in this was eloquently described by AY as 'blank scrabble tiles', becoming any character the performer wants them to be. In this sense, the spectator, like the blank scrabble tile, can make no meaning and have no value of their own. To maintain the metaphor, the spectator may be perceived as contributing no value to the completed performance, just as a blank scrabble tile has no value in a played word.

However, the individualistic competition to experience a one-to-one performance in *The Drowned Man* parallels a hierarchy and exclusivity that is apparent in accessing all one-to-one performances. As Helen Iball notes, the form itself might be 'might be decried as unethical – and even elitist in its limited availability – because it is to some extent unsustainable and, on this basis, potentially discriminatory and exploitative of performer and audience alike' (2012: 48).

In conclusion, I would argue that claims for one-to-one performances should consider more carefully the contexts in which they occur. Viewing strategies are affected, as Barker points out, by the particular histories of spectators and the ways in which they choose to participate. I therefore suggest that further work is needed to examine how audiences

experience the 'being-together' seemingly offered by one-to-one performances. While the physical jostling common to many Punchdrunk shows might not be an issue at one-to-one performance festivals, their position within the live-art circuit might place them within other realms of elitism and exclusivity. For this reason it is necessary to consider how the possible operation of feelings of 'competition' or 'hierarchy' in how audiences experience one-to-one work may limit their potential to produce a 'counterpublic'. The perceived communal value of 'being together' must therefore be considered in tension with the individualistic and competitive behaviour needed to achieve this very thing.

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