

Imagining Arden: Audience responses to place and participation at Taking Flight Theatre Company's *As You Like It*

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This article looks at audience responses to Taking Flight Theatre Company's outdoor, promenade production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which took place in Wales and the South West of England in July 2014. It draws on qualitative ethnographic research gathered through observations and semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face and in-situ with audience members immediately before and after the theatrical performances. In what follows, I consider how audience members responded to following the performers 'off the beaten track' and walking along real dirt paths in three different city parks. What I found was that, across the three different venues, audiences suggested that journeying through the parks with the performers facilitated an imaginative response to Shakespeare's iconic Forest of Arden as what Michael Saler terms a 'geography of imagination' (2012: 67), more than it revealed stories of the parks' own histories and geographical locales. Two common responses to the walking aspect of the production included a sense of the parks temporarily coming to stand in for an imaginary Arden, as well as a sense that audience members felt 'part of' the performance and, thus, a part of the Shakespearean imaginary world. The forest world of the play, they suggested, supplanted the 'primary World' geography of the actual parks with the imaginary 'secondary world' geography of Shakespeare's famously imagined and reimagined Arden (Tolkien in Wolf 2012: 23). How did Taking Flight's performance interventions work with, or against, the parks' geographies to affect how individuals imagined the world of the play? What might the reception of Taking Flight's performance tell us about imagined worlds presented in real places where the make-believe and the everyday rub up against one another? And under what circumstances might the reception of an imaginary 'Arden' signal something more productive than an indiscriminate erasure of local specificity? I will suggest that imagining Arden at Taking Flight's *As You Like It* took the form of an ongoing process of 'writing over' the primary worlds of the parks, which carried on, humdrum, alongside the performances. The mobile staging and

interactive exposition of the piece simultaneously challenged its audiences to extend potentially limiting conceptions of the imaginary world of Arden.

Arden as an imaginary world

Theatre and performance examples are largely absent from Mark J.P Wolf's otherwise encompassing and extensive theoretical study of imaginary worlds (although Shakespeare's island setting for *The Tempest* is listed in Wolf's appendices [2012: 293]). It strikes me that there is more scope to look at the reception of imaginary worlds in the context of theatre and performance, especially as the conditions in which audiences encounter these worlds in performance differ considerably from those encountered through other media.

Furthermore, the conditions of the encounter with the imaginary world of Arden in the outdoor spaces at which I am looking—simultaneously busy public parks—demanded a kind of *imaginative labour* from audiences to distinguish the world of the performance from the ever-swirling world of the everyday. The parks in which *As You Like It* was presented were not constructed theme-park worlds, nor were they contained immersive theatre environments, purpose-built for performances. Rather, the performances took place in landscaped public parks, meaning that they shared space with children, ball games, dog-walkers, and weather.

At this point, I would like to explain why I am thinking about Arden as an 'imagined world' in the context of contemporary performance, despite this forest's—and indeed any forest's—sharing many of the characteristics of the 'real' world. First, is Arden a wood or a world? Or both? Wolf ventures that, unlike stories, 'Worlds extend beyond the stories that occur in them, inviting speculation and exploration through imaginative means' (2012: 17). How is it possible to say that Arden extends beyond the place in which the story happens and forms a world in itself? Shakespeare's forest is of this world—this primary World—even though Arden, as it appears in *As You Like It*, is a fictitious place, irrespective of whether actual woods may have inspired Shakespeare's writing. But, even if no one agrees on where Arden is, was, or what it is or was like, the world of the forest continues to provoke 'speculation and exploration through imaginative means' (ibid). Jan Kott, for instance, gushes that 'The Arden Forest is like all Shakespeare's forests, except that it is possibly more amazing, as if it contained, repeated, or foretold them all' (1974: 275); and Harold Bloom memorably enthuses that Arden is 'the best place to live, anywhere in Shakespeare' (2004: 146). Kathleen Flaherty, who looks at stage representations of Arden in Australian landscapes, argues that, 'Arden is first and foremost a landscape of the imagination conceived and constructed through verbal accounts' (2009: 319). My suggestion is that, given the time and space over which Arden has been imagined and reimagined in literature and performance, it can indeed be usefully considered as constituting an imaginary world.

Contemporary outdoor performances of *As You Like It* can be traced to a late-eighteenth century fashion for theatre outdoors as much as to precedents at the Globe or other outdoor playhouses of the early modern period. Over a century before immersive theatre companies—most recognisably, perhaps, theatre company Punchdrunk—started

bringing audiences into physically contained and carefully designed imagined worlds (Biggin 2015; Machon 2013; Nield 2008; White 2012; Wozniak 2015); and before the term ‘immersive’ might have been utilised, however tenuously, by outdoor Shakespeare companies such as Taking Flight, certain theatre makers were bringing audiences into all kinds of parks and green spaces, and asking them to imagine that they had stepped into Arden. Shakespeare scholar Michael Dobson explains that a theatre group calling themselves the ‘Pastoral Players’ first performed *As You Like It* outdoors in Coombe Woods, Surrey in 1884 and 1885 (2011: 164). The success of the Pastoral Players led to a fashion for Shakespeare in the open-air, a form which was championed into the early twentieth century by Sir Philip Barling Ben Greet, the subsequent founder of the Regent’s Park Open-Air Theatre in London. Greet’s own Woodland Players presented *As You Like It* in 1887, ‘on location’, in its supposedly originary setting: Dobson recounts, “The Woodland Players’ advertisements for their 1887 performances at Barrett’s Park in Henley-in-Arden [...] excitedly promised ‘As You Like It performed for the first time in Shakespeare’s native Forest of Arden’” (174).

No surprise, then, that *As You Like It* and Arden—a world in a wood, variously imagined and presented as pastoral, antipastoral, green world, Arcadia, Eden, nurturing, frightening, and transformative—has continued to be a favourite, almost a cliché, for outdoor theatre ever since. Dobson ultimately argues that ‘everywhere one looks under the surface of English outdoor Shakespeare one finds the desire to sit in an English field and say, “This is Arden”’ (188), signposting the ideological implications of an Arden bound up with a residual, classed, and predominantly white, expression of a rural Englishness. Taking Flight’s *As You Like It* is of particular interest, therefore, because it begins to extend the idea of the world of Arden beyond these confines. To whom does the imaginative world of Arden belong? What do its inhabitants look like? And how might this performance of Arden in public spaces both subscribe to and subvert the longstanding tradition of particular kinds of outdoor *As You Like Its*?

Taking Flight’s *As You Like It*

A brief sketch of Taking Flight Theatre Company’s *As You Like It* and the conditions of the performance is necessary here to contextualise the audience responses that follow. This two-hour production, described as both ‘immersive’ and ‘promenade’ in its supporting literature, featured a multi-racial cast of differently-abled performers, telling the familiar story of a young woman called Rosalind, her lover Orlando, her father, a banished Duke, and their exile in the forest of Arden. Taking Flight works with ‘groups of people who have traditionally been under-represented in theatre’ (Taking Flight 2015), creating inclusive performances and challenging perceptions of (dis)ability through their work. Addressing the ‘imaginary worlds’ topic of this special issue, this article initially attends to audience responses to Taking Flight’s formal approach to spatial practices, picking out responses to an imagined Arden under trees in the parks. As director Elise Davison explains, ‘We are more responsive to the places we perform in so they are not just a backdrop to our work [...] We

encourage audiences to look in all the nooks and crannies' (Price 2013). Later, however, discussions of participation—as instigated by audience members—loop back to the questions of inclusivity and representation raised by *Taking Flight*'s work.

The performance itself began in an interactive fairground where painted props and similarly-coloured bunting were set up, decorating the space. Before the performance began, audience members had their fortunes told, competed in a duck race, fired balls at a coconut shy, and arm-wrestled *As You Like It*'s Charles the Wrestler. Anarchic and extravagantly textured costumes—designed by Becky Davies and constructed to be utilised in a touch-tour of the performance as well—were made in similar colours. Audience members with visual impairments were able to participate in a tactile exploration of the costumes and park setting with the actors prior to the performance itself. Parts of the parks designated as playing areas were also signalled by the same colours audiences encountered in the initial fairground setting. There are other things happening in the park, the simple signifiers of purple, gold, burgundy, and turquoise seemed to imply, but these colours designate where the world of the play is being imagined.

The introductory fairground activities transitioned into the opening scenes where, every time the word 'Arden' was uttered aloud, a group of musician/performers—wearing antlered or rabbit-eared headdresses—howled in anticipation of the place, spooking and exciting the heroine Rosalind, her cousin Celia, and the fool Touchstone, as they prepared to enter the forest. At the performances I attended, audience numbers varied between small groups of ten, or thereabouts, up to nearly one-hundred at some of the busier performances. Together, we trudged through the parks, following the performers and stopped to watch set scenes. Accommodating our range of travelling speeds and physical abilities, we waited at each new location for everyone to re-convene. Performers already in place interacted with those audience members who arrived first until everyone had gathered. In shared daylight, the performers spoke directly to the audiences, acknowledging our presence as witnesses to the scenes, and acknowledging the presence of other park users, hecklers, and, on one occasion, a Honda that appeared to have taken a wrong turn.

As we moved through each imaginary Arden (different trails in different parks meant that each iteration of Arden was slightly different), led by the aforementioned woodland animals, we happened upon scenes stationed under trees, whilst other performers roamed in the distance. Phoebe, a shepherdess, wandered looking for her flock, chased by her suitor Silvius. Orlando, the lovesick poet, passed us writing poems and attaching them to trees, leaving the props behind in the 'real' world. Live audio-description was available via individual radio-mics and British sign-language was incorporated into all aspects of the performance. Our feral guides taught us a travelling song, which we sang and signed—some more enthusiastically than others—as we moved through the parks, children appearing least embarrassed by this call to choral singing. The trails through the parks were wheelchair accessible and volunteer 'flight assistants' helped those who needed help to move between scenes.

As already mentioned, this production was presented in multiple parks, although the stories of the places themselves tended to be, for audience members, secondary to the idea of an imaginary Arden, which overwrote any of the parks' own stories. This 'writing over' the park's physical and material geography by the Shakespearean imaginary world illustrates a 'real' world location as a palimpsest (Turner 2004). I attended performances and conducted interviews at three different venues: at Cyfartha Castle in Merthyr Tydfil, at Thompson's Park in Cardiff, and at Blaise Castle in Bristol. At each park, audience members can be understood as collectively 'performing' a version of Arden together with the actors, in a performative process that involved physically moving through the parks and stopping to witness events at set stops. At Cyfarthfa—a nineteenth century castle on one-hundred and fifty acres of landscaped grounds, attesting to industrial success and decline—audiences gathered at a bandstand where trees and grassy hills blocked out traces of Merthyr below. Here, audiences left the fairground at the bandstand and wandered together around the landscaped park, stopping under occasional trees and imagining ourselves in Arden. Taking Fight's performance shared the hot summer space with an ice-cream van, picnickers, and a busy paddling pool. Once we left the bandstand and entered Arden, the castle was hidden from view, but it was always there, just around the corner, higher on the hill. The court from which Arden represented escape was never far away.

The following week at Thompson's Park—an enclosed park space with neat lawns, a bowling green, and ornamental flower-beds planted during the late eighteenth century—audiences gathered around a pond with a decorative water fountain, whose statue by Welsh artist William Goscombe John has been stolen and replaced on multiple occasions. Thompson's Park is in the residential area of Canton, a short walk from Cardiff's buzzy Chapter Arts Centre. Although much smaller in size than Cyfarthfa, audiences at Thompson's Park traced Arden together across similar distances along the park's paths, pausing at the top of mounds and by wooden benches edging tidy grass and bushier, unkempt land. There were proportionally fewer trees in Thompson's Park than at Cyfarthfa, but here too a few trees came to stand in for the imaginary forest. The same was the case at the third venue I attended. On the grounds of the eighteenth century Blaise Castle dairy estate in Bristol, audiences gathered in a sunken, grassy amphitheatre, waiting for disgruntled explorers to return from faraway pub toilets. Again, as at Cyfarthfa and Thompson's Park, audiences at Blaise left the fairground in the amphitheatre and walked along the sloping paths of another landscaped park, stopping under occasional trees and imagining ourselves in Arden.

Notes on Methodology

The conversations presented below are taken from ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews carried out with twenty-six participants at a mixture of both matinee and evening performances across the three park venues. Building on Penelope Woods's doctoral thesis, *Globe Audiences: Spectatorship and Reconstruction at Shakespeare's Globe* (2012), which set out to develop a method that 'enable[s] audiences to offer up their own accounts of performance' and which 'recognizes the diversity of that response and feeling

to be captured and accounted for in any project that speaks of audience' (28), I too carried out interviews with audience members immediately before and after performances, identifying and approaching participants individually and in groups. My process was facilitated by cooperation and support from Taking Flight and personnel at the parks, but I was in no way affiliated with or collaborating with the theatre company.

I am taking ethnography, after Paul Willis and Mats Trondman, to refer to 'a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience' (2002: 394). My process of audience research aligns with Willis and Trondman's definition of ethnography insofar as I made direct social contact, observing and interacting with multiple individuals, and analysed these encounters afterwards. Where my work cannot but diverge from their definition is in the idea of the field research taking place over a sustained time period. Each audience was unique and there was no way of dwelling longer with any given audience. The insistence that detail can only be accumulated through sustained engagement presents a challenge to the idea of audience ethnographies unless 'the field' is imagined differently – as being amongst audiences, perhaps, for a series of performances. The 'transitive' nature of theatre events, audience researcher Peter Eversmann notices, influences the kinds of conclusions a researcher can draw from face-to-face research (2004: 141). Shaun Moores, however, in researching television audiences, helpfully distinguishes between ethnography and qualitative audience research in the social sciences by outlining key differences in the relationship between the researcher and the researched within these two approaches. For Moores, 'reception studies can still properly be called ethnographies' (1993: 4). He clarifies, 'It is true that they are not based on extensive fieldwork in distant lands, but they do share some of the same general intentions as anthropological research' (4). I, too, was part of the audiences I observed and the ethnography is therefore crafted cognisant of my subjectivity and of the murky position I occupied as both audience member and ethnographer.

As is common practice in ethnography, individuals were interviewed anonymously and have been given alternate names to personalise the writing. The interviews were orthographically transcribed and are presented as they were spoken verbatim. Heeding audience researcher Matthew Reason's reminder, the ethnography attempts to 'avoid overly generalizable statements and to recognise the fundamental diversity of audience responses' (2015: 280). I have put a range of voices into conversation with one another rather than suggesting that they can be homogenised as belonging to 'an audience'. As I work through the responses, I move freely between conversations at all three parks, as what was interesting in relation to an imaginary Arden was identifiable in the feedback across all of the venues.

Then, following site-specific performance practitioner and scholar Mike Pearson, who adopts 'an attitude critical and suspicious of orthodoxy; an approach which embraces the impossibility of any final account of things' (2006: 27), I utilise theory only lightly, preferring to let the audience members do the theorising for themselves. As geographer Tim

Cresswell puts it, participants in ethnography are ‘everyday theorists who bring their own ideas of place to bear’ on the places they move through (2004: 79). One such ‘opening’ approach to ethnographic writing is proposed by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who ventures that, ‘It is of the essence of life that it does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination [...] Life, in short, is a movement of opening, not of closure’ (2011: 3-4). My attempt is to present a range of ideas from within the conversations with audience members as they speak to the discussions of an imaginary Arden above. As Pearson, Cresswell, and Ingold propose, I seek to open up new possibilities for thinking about audiences, imaginary worlds, and participation, rather than shaping the responses to Taking Flight’s work into any kind of final account or destination that fixes the conversations.

This (park) is the Forest of Arden

The first set of responses I look at here are those implying that, during Taking Flight’s performance of *As You Like It*, the ‘real’ trees of the parks complemented the play and gestured towards the imaginary world of Arden. At no point did audience members appear to really believe that they had entered into Shakespeare’s forest, that they had left the world in which the performances were taking place, but they did evince a sense of delight in temporarily recasting each of the three park spaces—Cyfarthfa Castle, Thompson’s Park, and Blaise Castle—as Arden. Audience members may seek to immerse themselves in imaginary worlds but, at the same time, are well aware that this is a ‘self-conscious strategy of embracing illusions while acknowledging their artificial status’ (Saler 2012: 13). Participants are more than capable of ‘living simultaneously in multiple worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance’ (ibid).

At Cyfarthfa, the experience of walking away from the fairground installation and into the first of the Arden scenes, performed on the edge of a crumbling tarmac path, was enough to conjure the feeling of being in a wood. Returning to this site after the performance, Mark and Donna explained how the few trees assisted their process of imagining a whole forest:

Mark: I think this bit all went really well. Like under the tree probably made you feel quite like you were in the middle of a forest. Yeah. Yeah.

Donna: Particularly, the scenes here, when you first came into the forest, you do get that sense that you’re in the forest. (14 June 2014)

Mark and Donna’s imaginative work was to substitute a small cluster of trees in the park for Arden. Gwyn, also at Cyfarthfa, explained that the park surroundings complemented the play’s content in a similar way:

Well it's set, isn't it, in the forest, the Forest of Arden? So I just liked the use of the trees and the landscape around you. It just seemed to all fit together quite well. (14 June 2014)

Jess, at the same performance, continued, by commenting on a relationship between the park and the play and again implying that being under the trees facilitated an imaginative response to the play's woods. Laterally, she implied that being under these trees was a pleasurable experience, given the warm weather on that particular day. There was a pleasure that was bound up with a temporarily imagining the world of the play in the real park context. She said:

Especially with this story... This story is set in the woods so that helps loads. That just makes it much nicer on a nice day. It's just much more pleasant than being anywhere else. Inside or anything. (14 June 2014)

From Jennifer, there was a sense that Cyfarthfa was superior to other imaginable Ardens, making a local claim for where she wished to imagine the world. She explained that she found the particular topography and fauna of Merthyr's Cyfarthfa setting to be complementary to the overall atmosphere of the performance: claims apparently attesting to a contentedness with her present location more than evidencing thought-through comparisons with where else she might have been.

Oo, yes, well... you're with Shakespeare... he does so many things in the Forest of Arden. And we're so lucky in Merthyr to have this park. All of the different coloured trees and everything. It's been lovely. Of course they're going to Cardiff next week and there's a lovely atmosphere there as well. But I think there are more hills, little hillocks here. (15 June 2014)

She continued, describing the detail of what was in the park and the performers' playfulness dressed as woodland animals in the setting. She then compared this experience of an encompassing Arden outdoors, with an imagined, contained performance of the play in an indoor theatre:

We're back to the Forest of Arden. When they were on the embankment there, when they were hiding behind the trees and they had their rabbit heads and they were running along, the shepherd chasing Phoebe, em, they were running so far, you couldn't do that on stage you see. You just couldn't. (15 June 2014)

Lynn and Donna discussed how the trees and birds in the park complemented the play and the costumes, giving form and life to the imagined world of Arden where the performed events unfolded.

Lynn: Also I think nature is a really strong theme within the play and they reflected that really nicely with the animal headdresses and animal noises and so that fit really well with the being outdoors and being in nature.

Donna: There was times when the birds just worked with it as well – you know, the sound of the birds I enjoyed.

Lynn: The parts when the shepherd in the fields was great and also the pinning of the pages to the trees, sort of...That was a nice match from paper to wood.
(14 June 2014)

In Lynn's final statement, the parks' primary geography collided with the secondary geography of an imagined Arden, as Orlando attached paper letters to trees, blurring the boundaries between what was real and what was imagined in the space. The Forest of Arden and the trees in the park at Merthyr are thus parallel worlds co-existing within the palimpsestic space.

Elsewhere, at Thompson's Park, I heard a similar story. Audience members reinscribed the park's residential Cardiff geography with an imaginary Arden here too. Tracy described the green surroundings, echoing some of the comments made above, thinking about how the performers utilised the park as part of the theatrical production, and alluding to the 'real' Forest of Arden as though it were a real place.

I suppose the idea of it being *As You Like It*, part of it is set in the Forest of Arden, which is very rural, em, and I suppose all the trees and the greenery helped me to imagine what the Forest of Arden might have been like and how the actors used the trees as well, you know, to stick the love notes on, so yeah, I feel like that added a lot to the story. (18 June 2014)

Holly imagined Thompson's Park to be standing in for Shakespeare's Arden too, recognising the performance as an artificial theatrical production, but enjoying the process of imagining it to be standing in temporarily for the world of the forest Shakespeare created.

When there were moments up in the forest. The trees and walking up and down the mountains worked really well. Well they weren't mountains, the little hills of the park worked lovely when we were watching the scene. The shepherdess scenes worked lovely in this sort of environment. (17 June 2014)

Also at Thompson's Park, Tim spoke about prior knowledge of *As You Like It* as a written text and explained that being at the performance extended his sense of the imaginary textual Arden to the enacted live performance. He appeared to be thinking first about how the

play's text conjured the imaginary world of Arden, not 'as a background for stories set in it', but rather, 'as a subject of study in itself' (Wolf 2012: 2) when he said:

When you read all of the verse he's [Shakespeare's] very visceral about the surroundings and how his characters move through the surroundings and even though again it's written in verse it's very, very background orientated. (18 June 2014)

Tim then went on to consider how the park contributed to how he imagined the performance, referencing the imaginary world of *Star Trek* as a comparator.

It's a massive, massive thing. I mean you see it thematically in movies, you know, where if they're in cities, it's part of the movie... TV shows. I use *Star Trek* a lot because the Enterprise becomes a cast member. When you're out and about in the open air everything has to be adapted to become a part of your show, whether it be a small hill or a wall or a tree or a squirrel that kind of steals the show [laughter]. *As You Like It* takes part in a forest so having the trees and having the rolling hills it helps to put you in the right position and frame of mind to, to be not just a part of the show itself but to kind of relate it to the performance. (18 June 2014)

Tim considered the forested parts of Thompson's Park to be standing in for Arden, an Arden which he considered not just as the background to, but as a 'character' in Taking Flight's *As You Like It*. The final parts of what Tim had to say, this feeling that the park both 'related to' the performance and also that he felt as though he were 'part of' the performance' is at the heart of another theme I identified amongst the responses to this production. In the following section, I consider how the walk through the parks generated responses that referred explicitly to 'participation', allowing audience members to identify for themselves what it meant to 'participate' in the performance, rather than imposing pre-existing ideas about audience participation onto the responses. In doing so, I argue that unsolicited responses on the subject of participation, especially in light of Taking Flight's emphasis on inclusivity, potentially extend the parameters of the imaginary world of Arden.

Participating in a Theatrical Event

In theatre and performance studies, and especially in relation to immersive forms of performance, Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) is now well-worn territory covering the contentious question of audience participation. Many scholars have engaged with the politics and aesthetics of what it means to 'participate' in performance, what it means for an audience member to be 'active' and what makes them 'passive', who has power, who has agency, and what modes of interaction are preferred, superior, or politically emancipatory (Bishop 2012; Freshwater 2011; Purcell 2013: 134; White 2013;

Reason 2015: 272-275). It is worth noting too that some of the criticisms around agency and empowerment that have been levelled at immersive performance in recent years have also arisen in discussions of promenade performances of Shakespeare. Dobson, in particular, finds promenade Shakespeares anything but liberating, arguing that:

the experience of attending a promenade Shakespeare today is characteristically not one of emancipation [...] but one of subjection, made explicit by figures around the fringe of the play who serve as authoritarian mediators between the play's world and that of its helpless spectators. (2005: 24)

He goes on to claim that promenade Shakespeares simply replace restrictive theatre seats with 'a more elaborate and better-agreed set of restrictions' (26). While I do not disagree with Dobson, I do think that care is needed not to undermine audiences' abilities to describe the conditions of their participation for themselves. Otherwise, ironically, we run the risk of blocking the agency that some immersive forms of performance, *pace* Rancière, are so anxious to promote: we want you to be emancipated (really, we do), but only on our terms, and when you are attending the kinds of performance that we think are good for you.

It is not my intention here to ask whether or how the audience members at Taking Flight's performances were empowered, emancipated, or not. What I am interested in, however, is in how they described themselves as 'participating' in the performances and how they chose to express their engagement with the work as participatory. My interview questions included no reference to participation. My focus was on questions of space and environment, and all of the audience references to participation arose unprompted, coming out of discussions around the promenading aspects of Taking Flight's production. At no point did it appear that anyone truly believed that they had been literally transported to another time or place, but they did often state that they enjoyed contributing to co-creating the imaginary world of Arden by journeying through the parks on foot, and willingly making-believe with the performers. Theatre scholar Dan Rebellato argues for thinking about '[t]heatrical representation as metaphorical' (2009: 25), by which he means that, '[w]e know the two objects are quite separate, but we think of one in terms of the other' (25). As Rebellato points out, theatrical representation is not illusory: 'In illusions', he writes, 'we have *mistaken beliefs* about what we are seeing. No sane person watching a play believes that what is being represented before them is actually happening' (24 [original emphasis]). In consciously entering into complicity with the performers, Taking Flight's temporary explorers of this imaginary Arden remained self-aware and self-reflexive about the 'real' forest as a metonym (closer than a metaphor) for Shakespeare's woodland setting; as a 'representation about representations', what Saler describes as a 'metarepresentation' (2012: 13).

It is important to note that the invitation to participate in the fairground activities and to move through the parks with the performance did not immediately appeal to

everyone. Gwyn explained that she had not been expecting to leave her picnic rug, demonstrating the 'fearful' and 'embarrassed' responses to invitations to audience participation that immersive theatre scholar Gareth White posits are endemic to many forms of audience participation (2013: 1), if not showing quite the helpless 'subjection' of Dobson's argument (2005: 24). Gwyn worked through her thoughts on being asked to join in with the production at Cyfarthfa:

It threw me a bit I must admit when they first started walking around. I wasn't expecting that. I was expecting to just sit here and watch it but when you sort of accepted that was going on and the setting is good too, isn't it? I felt a bit daft at first if I'm being honest at first because I wasn't quite expecting it. And you feel a bit silly joining in, don't you? And even when they first started with the fairground and things, you do feel a bit sort of reticent. If you're more used to sitting in an audience watching a play from the theatre seat it's a bit of a shock to the system to find yourself... Even open air events, I've been to open air events before but it's been open air – you sit there and you stay in the one place so to start moving around I was a bit thrown and leaping about and as they went further away I thought I've got to get up and join in. My back's aching a bit but beyond that...but once you got into it, it was quite good! Once you realise what was going on and that everybody else was doing the same thing you accepted it and it was quite good. (14 June 2014)

Here Gwyn was particularly classifying 'open air' performance as something replicating proscenium arch theatre, as something that happens whilst an audience sit in one position, whereas she understood *Taking Flight's* promenading as participatory, even though this *As You Like It* was, of course, also taking place in the open air.

Holly, however, at Thompson's Park, explained that moving through the landscape made her feel as though she were participating in the performance. The journey through the park felt like a journey through Shakespeare's play:

There was a beautiful atmospheric echo that happened when the actors were really getting into it. The environment, the promenade of the environment up and down the hills made it feel a lot more like you were traipsing through forests and made you feel much more involved in the show. (18 June 2014)

Here, the park's topography and the journey, winding its way around the grounds and mapped out along different paths, assisted her in imagining the world of the play. Similarly, Beth remarked that she felt 'active' and 'engaged' in the performance:

The performance drew you in and took you on a journey around the park. It felt like you were engaged all of the time. You're sort of made to be involved in it.

You're an active participant in it, which was a good thing. It made you follow the story more in that way. (17 June 2014)

Beth's friend Jessica continued, describing how she felt about seeing the actors surrounded by trees and walking through the landscape. Again, she seemed to suggest that as an audience member she felt as though she had been invited to join in with the story, to imagine Arden as she accompanied the performers through the park. She explained:

So the fact that they were surrounded by trees and I liked all of the up and downs as well so the audience felt like they were on a journey with the actors or with their characters. (17 June 2014).

Sarah and Tim also enjoyed pretending that they were walking the same route as Shakespeare's characters, literally following in their footsteps into Arden:

Sarah: I think the landscape helps. You know, as opposed to it being just a flat stage with a background. It's more interactive, you know, you feel like you're on the journey that the characters are on.

Tim: Yeah. You feel part of it really. (18 June 2014)

For Chantelle, the park setting felt like one of the most important aspects of being at the performance. Again, moving through the park, exploring the grounds, she said, made her feel 'part of' the performance, although this feeling of participation was something that appeared to come and go. She went on to refer to this experience as 'Shakespearean' (although without quite quantifying what Shakespearean meant):

Well, I thought the unique part of it all was the setting. The setting was absolutely beautiful. And moving around the park, I've never seen anything like it before. It was wonderful. We were integrated as part of the play. It was almost as though we were just playing a part as well. So very Shakespearean. It was great. You got very close to the actors. At times we were almost part of the performance. (18 June 2014)

The sense of participation that Chantelle described seemed to relate both to the act of moving with the performance around the park but also to the process of choosing to view the surrounding environment through the lens of a temporary Arden. Cheryl, at Cyfarthfa, imagined the park as assisting with the creation of an imaginary Arden too. She suggested that leaving the bandstand and moving on to part of the park that contained more trees made her feel 'part of' the performance:

Oh yeah, well it [the environment] had to be very much a part of it because the little area and the trees where it was quite densely wooded, I mean, you really felt as though you were in the middle of a very good wood. Oh, it was great, great. You were part of it. (15 June 2014)

Bethany explained how everything came together for her; the idea of the Forest of Arden, the park's landscape, the performers dressed as animals playing flutes in the trees, the Duke's banquet under another tree, and the care that the theatre company had taken to point to this imaginary world:

Even from the onset you felt that, yeah, I can get into this, and that just set the scene that was lovely. And just literally I suppose the main thing is about the Forest of Arden. Just the fact that they were already here. It was already constructed really so just really nice that they could play with all the different levels. And the music as well, coming from the top. And the way they were drinking. Was it set in a bar? The one at the top when they're going, giving you some... nice with the music that it came from up in the trees as well. It came from different areas, there was kind of a flute at one point, wasn't it? Up in the tree, just kind of went, just up there. The sound wasn't always down here. It was well thought out. (17 June 2014)

In conjunction with their comments around participation, audience members also suggested that *Taking Flight's As You Like It* extended an implicit invitation to reconsider how the imaginary world of Arden was populated. What I noticed was that the audience members did not speak about disability directly but used language that was positive although imprecise. Responses that alluded to inclusivity did so vaguely in as extensions of discussions around participation. Sara and Tim, for instance, conversed about the physical effort of partaking in the performance:

Sara: It's demanding on your back but it's worth it.

Tim: Yeah, it's worth it and it helps that we're in a ground with, you know, varying abilities, disabilities, you know. I mean Sara was saying she's got a bad back and I've got a bad knee, you know, so moving around is hard but it's good because it involves everyone. It's a little arduous getting up the hill but it's... it does involve everyone and I think that's definitely something to commend. (18 June 2014)

Holly elaborated, 'I think it brings new people along. The children were enthusiastic. I mean it's opening up a new diversity. It's opening up to new ideas. It's fresh and it's out there' (18 June 2014), and Chantelle explained, 'You really do feel that it's more open, more free and

that no one is judging you' (18 June 14). Audience members appeared inclined to try to articulate the performance's achievements in terms of a spatial intervention in Arden in public parks. Taking Flight's mobile staging for the imaginary world of Arden simultaneously challenged its audience to think about who lives in Arden.

Across the responses, there was a sense of delight in temporarily pretending that the park could be Arden, the performance holding focus amidst the other activities simultaneously occurring in the parks. Performance studies scholar Marvin Carlson discusses the Pastoral Players' 1884 production of *As You Like It*, to which I alluded at the beginning of the article, explaining that watching the play performed in the woods might have stimulated a certain kind of audience experience within that historical context. He writes, 'In the theatre, one might say, we see illusion and amuse ourselves by pretending it is reality, while in the Coombe Woods we see reality and amuse ourselves by pretending that it is theatre' (1990: 82-83). In the case of Taking Flight's *As You Like It*, the audience looked at the trees and amused themselves by pretending that these trees stood in for 'theatre'. The reality of the primary world of the parks was subsumed into the theatrical enactment of Arden. The parks stood in for 'theatre' rather than a 'real' secondary world, to return to Carlson's suggestion. Taken together, it is possible to read these comments around participation as relating to participating in the 'theatrical event' as a whole, as much anyone seemed to suggest that they felt as though they were participating by imagining themselves actually *in* the Forest of Arden. Audience researcher Willmar Sauter stresses the 'event-ness' of theatre (2004: 11) – the event incorporating what Susan Bennett seminally calls the 'outer' and 'inner' frames of performance; the 'outer' frame concerns everything around the fictitious 'inner' performance and the imaginary world it creates (1997: 1-2). Participation did not appear to mean that audience members felt as though they were actually shaping the action of the play nor that they were interacting meaningfully with the fictitious characters within the world of the play, but seemed to have more to do with taking part in the 'theatrical event' as a whole, part of which involved knowingly imagining Arden alongside the performers.

Conclusion

Taking Flight's *As You Like It* offered an opportunity for a live experience of one iteration of Arden—an imagined world that extends beyond the story of the play—from within this primary world. The act of audiencing was part of an ongoing process of imagining Arden, whatever prior engagement audience members may have had with the world, through prior encounters with the literary text or with theatrical performance. Throughout the discussions above, responses to Taking Flight's work have suggested that audience members found themselves drawn into the fictitious story of the play, consciously choosing to imagine the secondary world of the Forest of Arden on top of the primary world of the parks in which the performances took place. They appeared always aware of the artificial construction of the theatrical representation but seemed keen to enter into the spirit of the world of Arden by temporarily pretending to believe in it. Audience members had to choose to invest in this

secondary world geography amid interruptions from the primary geographies of the parks, pointing to a kind of imaginative labour needed for receiving imaginary worlds in public spaces—to make a choice to focus on the performance and to block out the everyday. Thus, ‘an individual could wholeheartedly “believe” in a fantasy world while concurrently being aware that it was fictional’ (Saler 2012: 31). They bought into the reality of the theatrical representation without imagining themselves immersed in it.

In this context, it was noteworthy that audience members repeatedly, and without prompting, referred to their audiencing as ‘participatory’, begging the question of what kinds of thinking might be generated by beginning with allowing audience members to articulate the term for themselves? It was clear that individuals meant different things by participation, but they pointed to the potential usefulness of listening again to audience members’ use of participation in everyday speech. In future, it would be interesting to compare the imaginative labour identified at these kinds of promenade performances in outdoor spaces to those given at the kinds of immersive performance taking place inside contained environments, where the constructed world in which the performance happens is more encompassing and where a different kind of imaginative engagement through place is likely to occur.

Audience responses to the spatial configuration of Taking Flight’s promenade performances in real places therefore demonstrated the significance of place in bringing shape to imaginary worlds through live performance. By walking through the parks with the actors, audience members engaged temporarily in a kind of chorography, where they drew the imagined Arden over the parks’ real landscapes and topographies. This had the effect of temporarily eclipsing the parks’ own geographies, stories, and histories, and of drawing audiences into the fiction. Such a writing-over of place might be more or less productive or problematic, circumstances depending. In the case of Taking Flight’s work, there was a productive challenge to the inhabitants of Arden through conscious multi-ability, multi-racial casting. Considered in this light, audience references to participation had particular resonance because they seemed to imply a willing complicity to reimagine the imaginary world of Arden with Taking Flight. Subtly, the production raised the question of who populates the imaginary world of Arden, indicating that live performance holds considerable potential for shaping who and what is in imaginary worlds. Live performances may clash with, reaffirm or extend the parameters of the imaginary worlds as they are previously conceived and might usefully contribute to extending their boundaries, their cultural and human geographies—potentially particularly productive when the source is a relatively limiting, middle-brow Shakespeare. Whilst engagement with the imaginary world of Arden in Taking Flight’s work was affected by the production’s configuration in the particular places of performance, however, these places did not emerge as definitive iterations of Arden. There was always a sense that Arden might be performed again, and elsewhere.

To conclude, then, it is my suggestion that there is considerable further potential for looking at audiences and imaginary worlds in the context of live theatre, where the encounter is enacted by a group of actors in the presence of a group of audience members

in a real place. Live performance—and particularly that which takes place in public spaces—therefore offers considerable scope for productive research into the labour of imagining and reception of iterations of imaginary worlds. I also propose that an ethnographic methodology that engages with audience members and acts as an ‘opening’ (Ingold 2011: 4) might make room for some of the capaciousness of responses to the kinds of imaginary worlds being presented. Such a methodology might necessitate a gentle kind of listening to how audience responses are articulated and allow the responses to breathe a bit rather than attempting to fix them into a ‘final account’ (Pearson 2006: 27), despite the inevitable fixity of any written ethnographic work. Unlike some of the imaginary worlds of some well-known literatures, films, and television series, there is no franchise on the Forest of Arden. And yet, Shakespeare’s forest has been revisited and reimagined as part of a process extending over four-hundred years. Ardens on location, outdoors, continue to draw theatre audiences, who participate in a performance of imagining Arden in green spaces during the summertime. Amongst the responses I encountered at Taking Flight’s work, the park spaces never quite became Arden and the imaginary worlds were not immersive. Instead, audience members described themselves as participating in a theatrical event where the performance and the environment both gestured towards one iteration of Arden, but where audience members did the rest of the imaginary work.

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