



6.

Working with Pairings

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Like a glass of Medoc and a slice of sharp Cheddar, some combinations just bring out the best in each other. A creatively challenging way to work – solo or group – is to explore a theme in tandem with a compositional form. So, as a little amuse bouche at this point of the book, we proffer three form and content pairings which have elicited some beautiful performances from artists we have worked with over the years. Once you have sampled these, I encourage you to come up with more of your own. Remember, the most dynamic pairings are often the ones that really rub up against each other or seem to be diametrically opposed.

FAILURE & TEXT

✂ Writing materials, examples of 'failed' text (written, digital, recorded etc.)

🕒 45 minutes

Both theatre and performance are only too well aware that failure is always already imbricated within them. Failure is consciously built into some performances, from Buster Keaton's slapstick falls to Goat Island's *When Will the September Roses Bloom? Last Night Was Only a Comedy* (2004) which includes the line: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the unfortunate task of informing you that we're missing the "n" the "s" the "u" the "w" the "h". And unfortunately, we're missing the popular "f" and the "v" and the "j"' (quoted in Bailes, 2010: 200).

This first pairing works with Text as its form and Failure as its content (this is also reversible).

🗨️ Take three minutes to compose a freewrite list of all the ways that text/language might 'fail'. For example, stuttering, losing one's voice, being con ... con... constantly interrupted. Some text might go missing, dissolve, disappear, become infected, broken or run backward. It might be unfinished, incomprehensible, stammered, incomplete, misspelt. A Zoom connection might freeze, a phone call end due to a dead battery, a conversation might be so painful that words get stuck in the throat.

🗨️ Now choose one or more of these 'failings' and use it to develop a micro performance in which failure becomes an integral part of the performance. Remember that the quest here is to make a text-

based piece. That text can be spoken, recorded or projected. But in each case, the text somehow fails and through that failure the story, the meaning arises.

Treat yourself to Sara Jane Bailes's excellent book *Performance, Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2010).

DESIRE & PROXIMITY

✂ Writing materials

🕒 One hour

Proximity in performance can expand time, seconds into hours, you into me. Jo Machon writes that audience responses to proximate, immersive, intimate works reflect a 'genuine wish to make *human* contact, often with another human as much as with the work itself; an enthusiasm for undergoing experiences that both replace and accentuate the live(d) existence of the everyday world' (2013: 25). Within these close encounters between audience members and performers it is fascinating to reflect on what elements might allow someone in and what might keep them at a distance? How close is too close? This desire for connection, intimacy even, manifests at some level in all the work Leslie and I have made as Curious. Here I pair Proximity (form) with Desire (content) in a duet that invites you to experiment with the elasticity of the live encounter, pull at its edges, find how close you can get and how close is too close.

🗨️ Freewrite on desire for three minutes.

🗨️ Freewrite on repulsion for three minutes.

🗨️ When you have finished, pause for a moment to reflect on which prompt flowed more readily for you. Were you surprised?

🗨️ Now go through what you have written and underline a few titillating words and phrases and commit them to memory.

🗨️ Put the writing to one side and stand up. Make sure you have some space around you. Close your eyes and work impulsively responding to the following prompt:

Where is desire in your body?

Work from the body – find the place that is true to you.

🗨️ Focus on a sense of desire rooted in that part of the body. Feel it there, the heat, the vibration, the power. What are all the words you associate with desire? With your attention still on that place in your body say all your desire words out loud.

Repeat this exercise this time with the focus on repulsion.

Where is repulsion in your body?

🗨️ Find the place where it resides, and focus your attention there. Now think of all the words you associate with repulsion, again with your attention and energy centred on that place in your body. Say those words out loud.

Now we will go through a list of prompts to place desire and repulsion in different parts of your body.

Go with the instruction, flood that part of your body with desire/repulsion and see what happens. Allow 30 seconds for each prompt. As you mentally channel desire/repulsion to different parts of your body, imagine that the rest of your body is empty.

👉 Put desire into your hands, let your hands be full of desire. How do they move? Where do they lead the body?

👉 Let that go and put repulsion into your elbows. How do they move? Where do they lead the body?

👉 Let that go and put desire in to your shoulders. How do they move? Where do they lead the body?

👉 Let that go and put desire into your back. How does your back lead the rest of your body?

👉 Let that go and put desire only into your left rib cage. Now how do you move? Notice not just direction and type of movement but the rhythms, pace and energy that different parts of the body demand.

👉 Let that go and put desire into your right hip. How does it move? Where does it lead the body? What kind of velocity or trajectory does it have?

👉 Let that go and put desire into your thighs. How do they move?

👉 Let that go and put desire into your left knee.

👉 Put desire into your feet.

👉 Let that go and put repulsion into your left hand.

👉 Put repulsion into your left leg.

👉 Put repulsion into your arms.

👉 Let that go and put desire in your left hand and repulsion in your right.

👉 Let that go and put desire into your left foot and repulsion into your right leg.

👉 Let that go and put desire into your left shoulder and into your left leg.

👉 Let that go and put desire into your left hand and leg and repulsion into your right hand and leg.

👉 Let that go and put desire into your entire front and repulsion into your entire back.

👉 Now continue to develop this work with a partner. Make one of you A, the other B, and in the same spirit as the above exercises, work spontaneously and impulsively. (Agree consent guidelines between you as regards touching.)

👉 A puts desire in their elbows while B puts repulsion in their back.

👉 Release.

👉 A puts desire in their whole front while B puts desire in their whole front.

👉 Release.

👉 A puts desire in their whole back while B puts repulsion in their whole front.

👉 A puts desire in their neck while B puts repulsion in their neck.

👉 A puts desire in their whole body while B puts desire in their whole body.

Play with as many variations of this as you wish. You can also make it a trio or a quartet and see what choreographies arise.

The final development of this exercise is to work spatially, expanding and contracting proximity between the partners, for example: 'perform desire at eight feet, three feet, four inches'; 'perform repulsion at eight feet, three feet, four inches'. You might choose to develop these gestures into a choreographic score.

To conclude have a discussion (group) or do some journal writing (solo) in which you reflect on how different parts of the body responded to holding and manifesting desire and repulsion and what curiosities or surprises came up for you. Reflect too on the impact of shifting proximities. How does desire at eight feet differ from desire at three inches? When did things feel so close that the sense of intimacy of was lost? What were the points when the relationship felt too claustrophobic or charged?

Treat yourself to Jo Machon's fantastic *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (2013). You might also like our book *Performing Proximity: Curious Intimacies* (2014).

RITUAL & OBJECT

✂ Gather materials that resonate for you with 'ritual', including textures, objects, texts, scents and sounds. Bring in a range of everyday objects alongside those that hold personal significance, histories or memories.

🕒 45 minutes

Ritual is the provenance of theatre. Generally, we think of ritual as referring to expressive, symbolic activity undertaken with a specific sense of intention (a baptism, a rain dance etc.). Additionally, we may think of these activities/behaviours/gestures being enacted over time (daily sun salutation, weekly confession). Following on from this, take a moment to reflect on the differences between rituals and habits. A ritual is something that is enacted and repeated with a purpose beyond the actual physical action itself, whereas the purpose of the habit is the action itself.

Reflect on (solo) or discuss (group) the ways ritual is used in daily life and the types of impact it can have. Here are a couple of discussion or journal starters:

👉 What do we mean by ritual in life? What do we mean by ritual in performance?

👉 Freewrite for ten minutes on ritual.

🗨️ Freewrite for three minutes each on the following:

Emptiness and fullness in rituals.

Rituals in your own family life.

**Ritual that could/should be full of meaning
– but often isn't.**

🗨️ Underline key phrases of text from all the writing you have done.

Rituals rely on objects and within rituals objects take on a power, potency and totemic quality so fully that they can often stand in for the ritual itself.

🗨️ Freewrite for three minutes listing the objects in your life that have power and potency beyond their function.

🗨️ Freewrite for three minutes about an object that connects you to a specific memory.

🗨️ Take a moment to underline key lines.

🗨️ Using some of the text you have underlined and the items you have selected, work with both objects and ritual and create a micro performance wherein one is dependent on the other.

IDEAS / REFLECTIONS / SKETCHES