

Theatre, Landscape and Memory

Case Study 2 - *Merlin's Child*, 2000, by Sally Mackey

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Abstract



This report is the second in a series commissioned by Sally Mackey from independent researchers as part of an ongoing practical research project which seeks to explore the value of collaborative drama events in powerful landscapes and to experiment with theorising practice. This summer's innovative *Merlin's Child* (2000) project is evaluated below in terms of its fit with Mackey's emerging hypothesis about being-in-place. It is compared with last year's *Beware the Jabberwocky* (1999) project, in order to assess how far specific factors can be seen to determine the value of such experiences for the participants. Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used to explore the variables set out by Mackey in her practical research proposal: 'Theatre, Landscape and Memory 2000 - The *Merlin's Child* Proposal' (see Appendix D). Other factors, which emerged during this phase of the research project, are also discussed.

Introduction

Drama, Landscape and Memory

The themes explored in the following report initially emerged as ways of thinking about the value of collaborative drama events in powerful landscapes. These developed through Sally Mackey's work as a director of undergraduate drama productions at the Minack Theatre between 1993 and 1999. In 'Drama, Landscape and Memory' (1999), Mackey delineates her discovery of the following 'leitmotifs' in the feedback she gained from the student participants in Minack projects over several years:

- Identity with a group
- The landscape and escape
- Memory
- Site-specific theatre

Employing a range of theoretical arguments, Mackey explores several factors that could explain why these themes emerged so forcefully in the students' responses to the Minack projects and she generates a hypothesis about the variables, which must be in place to give such drama experiences their value for the participants.

According to Mackey's thesis as detailed in 'Research Proposal: Minack Project 1999' (see the first part of Appendix D), three elements, if successfully combined, can give students a sense of being in place that acts as a key positive memory in their most transient years:

- The show must be a **successful site-specific production**, being designed and devised for the space, with appropriate music and form, an archetypal narrative and an ensemble, collective style, utilising the landscape and building the narrative offstage.
- The students must **identify with a community group**. Using large group collaborative methods under clear leadership to devise the piece, matching the collaborative underpinning within the piece's narrative, a history and tradition is built that each student feels part of, and being removed from the everyday to the far end of the country.
- The combined natural and human contrivance of **the landscape** must provide a sense of peace, security, the removal of the self through an awareness of beauty, escape and possibly a return to the ideals of childhood.

Case Study 1: *Beware the Jabberwocky* (1999)

The first case-study to test Mackey's emerging hypothesis focused on the 1999 CSSD production at the Minack Theatre, *Beware the Jabberwocky*. Millie Taylor's report (2000) assessed the *Beware the Jabberwocky* project in the terms set up in Mackey's research proposal, and concluded with statements from independent academic observers, Tony Jackson and Peter Woods, affirming the Minack Project's value and supporting Mackey's hypothesis about the combination of factors:

If they (the students) were to remember anything of the degree programme the Minack projects would always be at the top of their agenda. (Jackson 1999)

Case Study 2: *Merlin's Child* (2000)

The second case-study, reported here, focuses on the production of another large-scale, site-specific, devised production. Performed this time at a number of different sites in the Wye Valley borderland region between England and Wales, it took place in August 2000. A new theatre company (CENTRed) was formed from present and past students of CSSD, comprising approximately 75% graduates and 25% undergraduates. In addition to providing the second case-study for the 'Theatre, Landscape and Memory' research project, the production also served as a pilot project for the CENTRed company, which Mackey hopes to establish permanently at CSSD, as a bridge into the professional world for CSSD Education Department graduates.

Methods

I watched videotapes of the first three days of CENTRed's rehearsals at Easter, which included interviews with individual company members. I visited the company a number of times each week from the beginning to the end of the pre-performance period and made detailed written observations. All participants completed Questionnaire 1 (see Appendix A)

in the final few days of the pre-performance period. I interviewed most of the participants formally or informally, singly, in pairs or in groups during this period.

I lived alongside the company for parts of the run, travelling in the company minibus, observing and interviewing company members. I attended the dress rehearsal, first-night performance at Goodrich Castle and final three performances, at Chepstow Castle, Tintern Abbey and Caldicott Castle. More than 50 child and adult audience-members gave their responses to the production either by questionnaire or interview sampled from over the whole course of the run. The production was reviewed in local papers. All company members completed Questionnaire 2 (see Appendix B) during the final few days of the run.

In the post-production period, two independent academics from Manchester University and Reading University submitted reports evaluating the production. I surveyed the emails sent between company members, and the ongoing communications on the *Merlin's Child* website, which a company member created during this period. I also produced a report for the CSSD Management Committee assessing the value of CENTRed's permanent establishment, concluding that it could bring many benefits to CSSD, its current students, its graduates and the wider community.

Findings

Were Mackey's three factors present?

The following sections implicitly record the effect of the invariant variables present in this case study (See Appendix D, final section).

1. It was a successful site-specific production.

From the evidence of company and audience comments, *Merlin's Child* was a successful site-specific production in the terms established by Mackey in the research project proposals:



A. It was designed and devised for the space:

“The locality is perfect for the 4th/5th century setting...using Welsh/Celtic references throughout...It is ideal as a touring show, particularly the freedom given to the people of Avalon to wander the ‘land’... The vastness of the spaces require huge actions... large-scale battles, dances and creatures...Clear signals are given to the audience... The images are very strong...” (Company comments)

“It is ideally suited to the outdoor performance space, particularly as the actors get behind, in and around the audience... The castle topography provided a superb natural amphitheatre for the stage area...The fading daylight gave it great atmosphere... Actions and speeches from raised areas had dramatic impact...” (Audience comments)

B. Music was appropriate:

“We only use acoustic instruments, such as guitars and drums... I feel the songs really capture the collaboration of the group...it heightens emotional involvement in the piece...” (Company comments)

“Music was integral to the story...It unified the production...It kept the spirit alive...” (Audience comments)

C. An ensemble, collective performance style was employed:

“There is a great sense of complicity and comradeship among the group...The characters have been developed collectively... using the skills of professionals to their full potential... a way of working that increases the actor’s responsibility for the whole piece...The general company feeling is extraordinary...” (Company comments)

“We were most impressed by the dedication of the cast, individually and collectively...by the way the cast entered into the spirit of the performance with the audience...” (Audience comments)

D. The narrative was built offstage:

“The offstage moments enhance the performance by giving the impression that the venue ‘lives’ as it did then...We gather as watchers to most scenes and give the idea of the presence of Avalon... It also helps to establish, create and develop the theme of community throughout the piece...” (Company comments)

“I loved the cast mixing with the audience... the way they continued to act when offstage ...and in the interval...” (Audience comments)

E. Archetypal narrative was used:

“...The power and strength of Avalon comes from its community...The wedding scene demonstrates the collaboration of art-forms – song, dance, rhythm, movement, music, alongside the thematic unity of Christianity and pagan beliefs, Avalon and real world, Guinevere and Arthur...” (Company comments)

“The juxtaposition of the old and the new; Avalon and the court, pagan and Christian... The messages that strength does not come from violent confrontation... that the land, human kind and the spiritual world are connected and interlinked... a deeper recurrent theme of death and rebirth...” (Audience comments)



2. Identifications with a group were made.

‘Drama, Landscape and Memory’ had discovered a number of different group affiliations among the Minack participants. Individuals identified themselves with their DE group (the collective of three undergraduate years on the Drama and Education degree-course), with their own year-group, with smaller pre-existing friendship groups and with new friendship groups once at the Minack. In addition to these, the most obvious and powerful difference this time was participants’ identification with the CENTRed company, a new collective with new aims and intentions, for whom *Merlin’s Child* had the vastly heightened status of being a pioneering and inaugural project. Pride in the nascent CENTRed company and feelings of

responsibility for its success were evident at all stages of the project. Furthermore, whilst *Merlin's Child* was repeatedly identified as a continuation of the Minack tradition, individuals also enjoyed many of the differences they perceived from Minack projects (principally characterised as CENTRed's superior company spirit of enthusiastic professionalism). Indeed, passing *Merlin's Child* into 'the tradition' was joyously enacted after the last show, when a medley of seven past years of Minack songs was sung at the cabaret, appended with songs from *Merlin's Child*. The fact that the same Musical Director had worked on many of these productions was obviously important in enabling this to occur with such assurance. Similarly, the role of Sally Mackey as Director over seven years, and the participants' memories of her past leadership, also clearly aided identification with the CENTRed group. In particular, two elements of CENTRed's identity were consistently commended by the participants:

A. Collective attitudes of professionalism and commitment.

B. Collective feelings of enthusiasm, equity and achievement.

These were seen to support each other and were attributed to two major differences from Minack projects:

1. Individuals' voluntary involvement.

2. Individuals' greater responsibility in the devising process.

- *"The company feeling is stronger..."*
- *"The whole company was here by choice and much more committed..."*
- *"I have felt much more of a professional and more able to input as an equal..."*
- *"Perhaps there is more of a sense of joy rather than duty which brings about a sense of collaborative achievement..."*
- *"Merlin's Child far outweighs the collaboration with the company at the Minack. For me, this has been the biggest difference and the reason I have enjoyed the project so much..."* (Company comments)



3. The landscape provided challenge, focus, resonance, a sense of spirituality and authenticity.

Only one participant reported that she had not really been affected by the landscape, saying, *“It is beautiful but we haven’t had time to enjoy it!”* Others described the intensity with which the company worked in the landscape as a positive factor, saying that moving between venues almost every night forced them to attend harder to details.

- *“Part of the challenge and joy has been adapting the text and action to the specific venues without losing the core of the play.”*
- *“I have found that the experience has relied heavily on extension of the details of each space... attention had to be high... no one could afford to lose concentration at any moment...”*
- *“Constantly having to look and check things out because of the different venues each day, seeing things you might have normally missed...”* (Company comments)

Unlike at the Minack, the participants were challenged to adapt continually to ever-changing environments and this repeated unsettling seemed both to keep the excitement level high and to heighten their attention to the group, as if calling forth basic psychological and physiological survival muscles rarely stretched in post-modern life:

- *“With the Minack you learn to work with the space and get comfortable throughout the week. This project relied heavily on the company’s ability to adapt to every environment. It relied on a company awareness.”*
- *“Each new castle was like the first day at the Minack.”* (Company comments)



If the challenge offered by this landscape ever threatened to overwhelm, one way of coping could have been by being "too busy to enjoy it".

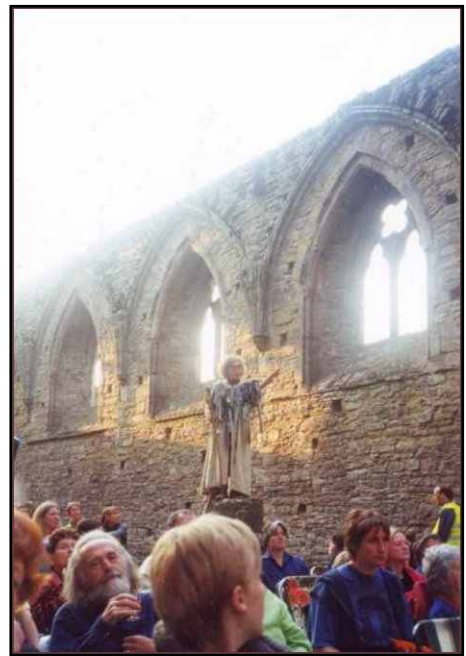
Using technology was another strategy for coping with the sublime unknown environment, unlike at the Minack where, as Mackey had noted, "Even the most pragmatic traveller has to recognise that trains and most mobile phones stop" (1999). As many as ten company members could be seen standing outside Caer Llan each night after the show, where there was mobile-phone reception, each speaking as if alone, into the dark landscape, to others elsewhere. Interestingly, the company member especially singled out in the cabaret for her ubiquitous mobile-phone usage offstage had played the part of a non-human, mythical creature onstage. Perhaps keeping in touch with the world outside *Merlin's Child* became even more imperative for her because being the only dragon removed her

from the onstage groups' identities and closely identified her with the natural world and the landscape. Furthermore, she was one of the few participants who had played dual roles, changing character as the play progressed, and this may have further challenged secure identifications.

It is not unlikely that individuals' specific roles within the archetypal narratives they are dramatising deeply affect the ways in which they can and do experience the environment, both consciously and unconsciously, despite (or because of?) the fact that they are 'only' acting. A strong sense of how experiencing the landscape can be deeply influenced by role was reported by the participant whose onstage persona was the powerful, omnipresent matriarch of Avalon:

Being 'mystic' by the river and looking back at the castle, I felt a true sense of being 'at one' with the landscape... Ditto Tintern, walking around outside in the dark, hearing the show, lights flickering, stars twinkling, dark hills... I could go on...

This suggests that further exploration of the links between the roles played within archetypal dramatic narratives and experiences of the landscape could prove both fascinating and important in understanding more about the possibilities of acting within the environment.





Awareness of the landscape's beauty was also evident, and, as in the Romantic tradition, it was a powerful, active beauty, with words used to describe the landscape seeming to convey individuals' spiritual states. The landscape was "*inspiring*", "*awesome*", "*overwhelming*". Almost every participant attributed the landscape with extreme, positive, transformative power, which could heighten onstage effects but was not confined merely to this. The landscape "*gave me a sense of freedom as a performer*", "*inspired me to take risks*" and "*fuelled my imagination*". Sometimes explanations of the settings' effects were more technical: "*The subtle changes in meaning and emphasis brought about by the different proxemics in each venue have kept us on our toes and kept the performance fresh...*". It was not always easy to discern how differentiated the landscape was from the project's other elements in the minds of the

participants, however, and how much idealism was projected, but Mackey maintains that as with dreams, "even if this is a self-created idyll, does it matter?" Just as the Minack Theatre's geographical position "gives a rationale for the intensity for such feelings", it seems clear that the Wye Valley landscape and sites focused similar processes of thought and feeling for the participants, and explanations ultimately shear off into the incommunicable, as with the previous Minack research, with one participant explaining simply, "*I have experienced a real sense of magic here...*".



With their strong sense of the "awesome", many seemed to feel that "*some places were more 'spiritual' than others...*", and most of the company recorded Tintern Abbey and the Caerleon Amphitheatre as the sites of their two most memorable performances.

This power, which all seemed to feel, was most often explained via the notion that the resonance between the play's subject matter and the venue was at its most pronounced there. These two sites were seen as "*more explicit with potential*" than all the others. One participant cited the "*irony*" of the Tintern Abbey performance. In this "Christian space", the feeling of Avalon's old ways of being crushed beneath the stones of the new seemed to affect company and audience alike, as the video of the performance shows. Similarly, many participants felt that Caerleon, the only site of the tour where King Arthur may once have truly been, added emotional, imaginative and symbolic power to the piece. It seems as if in those sites where the company could identify a sympathetic historical spirit, they felt that their performance was animating and being animated by something indefinable, 'magical', other-than-themselves. Concretising this feeling, two or three participants were certain that they had seen a ghostly nun during the show at Tintern Abbey, who had blessed their performance.

Matching the narrative to the sites in this way was another new feature of this project, as Minack subjects have tended to be epic but not necessarily historical or site-specific. The resonances felt by the participants almost without exception, in these two sites in particular, contributed greatly to their appreciation of the project as a whole, and seem to have been substantially heightened by the research they had carried out into the historical period, narrative, characters and places during the devising stages, a process which was apparently much more substantial than any they had done for Minack projects. The version of *Merlin's Child* which had been performed at the Minack a few years earlier did not compare to CENTRed's version, in terms of "*the cast's understanding of what's going on*", according to a former Minack participant who was involved with both old and new *Merlin's Child* productions.

Was there a sense of escape or a return to the ideals of childhood?



A few of the participants likened the CENTRed company to a family and several spoke of the holiday-like nature of the trip to the Wye Valley. Much more often, however, participants evoked memories of previous Minack experiences and these reminiscences, especially in informal settings (at breakfast, in the minibus, loading the van after shows, etc.) were not always free from "the parody, pastiche and irony of post-modern times"

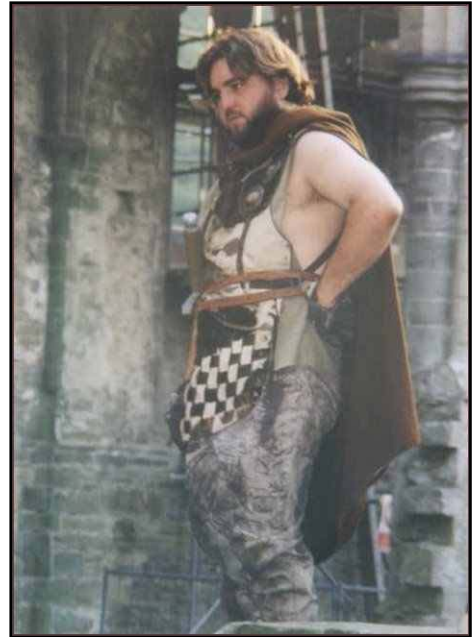
(Mackey, 1999). The cabaret event was exemplary in showing how an ironic approach to the project could entertain, release tension, ameliorate anxiety about the company's imminent dispersal and bond the group even more strongly. Irony was also one of the vital shades in the production's narrative tone, as when Avalon parodied the sword in the stone scene or when 'the real world' substituted their own ballad for Avalon's "bedtime stories". What Mackey (1999) had characterised as "the heaviness of adult cynicism", however, did

seem wholly absent from the project and this was clearly highly valued by the participants, who felt the group's general ethos to be a kind of joyful, committed professionalism.

Participants' intensely emotional and whole-hearted engagement at all stages of the project is likely to have been encouraged by the way in which Mackey explained her personal commitment, at the outset, in terms of certain autobiographical experiences from childhood onwards, leading her to revisit Monmouthshire and particular sites. In addition, company members were provided with an implicit model of strong, perhaps archetypal, familial support during the run, in the actively participating presence of Mackey's husband and mother.

Will the experience act as a permanent and constructive memory?

Of her Minack research, Mackey says, "it was reverence for the careful nurturing of the collective memory which stood out." This has been the case too with the *Merlin's Child* project. The elaboration of an existing tradition of collective dramatic storytelling in a powerful landscape, both using and creating collective memories, appeared to be a deeply grounding experience for *Merlin's Child's* participants whilst the project was underway. It is possible that the tradition was evoked so consciously this time both as a participant-effect of Mackey's ongoing research project and as a consequence of the project's new parameters. Those parameters being to affirm the new group identity and to give a sense of familiarity in the new landscape/s. Nurturing the collective memory through dramatic storytelling also formed a central theme of the production itself. With the people of Avalon representing the storytelling function for the 'real world' characters within the play, the participants' "delighted absorption" (Mackey 1999, citing Raymond Williams) in the project might have been rightfully anticipated. The project's memorability is further determined by Mackey's focus on reflexivity in drama education, which has both underpinned the DE degree course that all participants shared, and framed this research project. A longitudinal follow-up study of past Minack participants and the *Merlin's Child* group is now necessary to continue to explore what has become of their memories of the projects and how permanent and constructive the memories continue to be.



Would the sense of being-in-place lessen if further elements were removed?

There were certain invariant variables in the *Merlin's Child* project to differentiate from *Beware the Jabberwocky*. These are listed in the research proposal (Appendix D) and have been referred to throughout this report (e.g. the change of the specific site; the composition of the company). These invariant variables do not appear to have lessened the sense of 'being in place' for the participants although a longitudinal study would be needed to affirm this.



In order to continue to explore Mackey's being-in-place hypothesis, comparisons might now be considered between the *Beware the Jabberwocky/Merlin's Child* projects and other projects taking place at CSSD or elsewhere. It would be interesting to consider, for example, what might have happened to the sense of identification with a group and feelings about the landscape if the production had been unsuccessful. Similarly, it would be interesting to explore the site-specific variable further, for example by comparing the effect of using the same production methods in non-rural, 'beautiful', or historically resonant sites. How important is the country/city (sense of escape) effect and if it is, at least partly, a mind-and-tradition-created idyll, could the mind similarly idealise urban environments, how and with what value? How could a fast-changing, 'ugly' urban environment inform the perceptions, group-identifications and memories of a group performing there? Would the project have similar value for the participants if the audience they were playing to, and temporarily living among, were themselves less socially cohesive, more disparate and diverse?

It would also be interesting to compare examples of site-specific performances which have been successful in the terms considered above, but which could have lacked identification with a community group. If such examples exist, what other factors have contributed to the production's success, and is the value of such a project even comparable? It might also be useful to explore how such an experience could effect participants at different life-stages. Would the project's effects have been as valuable if the participants had not been Drama Education degree students, or if they were not students at all? How productive of a sense of being-in-place might the memory of such a project be if undertaken at different times of life? How would a collaborative theatre group need to be constituted for similar effects to occur and what new knowledge could this bring us all about *communitas*?

Memory-research across diverse scientific fields could be integrated with these rich qualitative findings on theatre, landscape and memory, fortifying the shaky, vital bridge between our two traditionally divergent 'cultures':

At its best, research on memory may help heal the split in our lives between subjectivity and objectivity, reduce the fractures in our own personae. As we face the challenge of a new millennium in an increasingly fragmented world, this goal seems not abstract but urgent. (Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory*, 1993)

Finally, in order to assess how far the findings reported here are ultimately transferable beyond the specific practices of Sally Mackey and CSSD, the research project could now begin to explore comparisons with other educational practices within Central and other schools of drama-education training in the UK and abroad. As Andy Kempe of Reading University states, and as I have suggested above, the implications not just for actor training but for aesthetic, social and indeed environmental education could be considerable.



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- Woods, P. (1999) 'Comments on *Beware the Jabberwocky*'.

VIDEO

- Merlin's Child* Easter Weekend rehearsals, CSSD.
- Merlin's Child* Tintern Abbey performance, CSSD.

Appendices

Appendix A - Questionnaire 1

1. In what ways is *Merlin's Child* appropriate for the spaces you will be performing in? Give examples of some moments from the piece and explain how they might work as site-specific performance in the different venues.
2. Describe some of the offstage action you will be involved in and explain what it will contribute to the overall piece.
3. Describe/quote some of the moments/lines where you think the theme of community collaboration comes across most strongly in the piece.
4. Give one or two examples of what communal memory has contributed to this production.
5. What new insights have you gained, personally and/or professionally, during the pre-performance period?
6. What things have most pleased you about being in this group so far?
7. How do you regard the prospect of leaving London, and why?
8. What has gone as you expected so far and what has surprised you?
9. Any other comments?

Appendix B – Questionnaire 2

1. For you, how has this project compared to Minack?
2. How has the landscape affected you during this project?
3. Which specific moments of this project will you particularly remember, and why?
4. What have you most enjoyed about this project?
5. Which audience reactions have most pleased you?
6. If CENTRed was permanently established, what would be the main benefits to CSSD graduates?
7. What do you perceive the benefits would be to CSSD?
8. What could the managers of CENTRed learn from this year's pilot project?
9. Put your arguments for permanently establishing CENTRed in one persuasive sentence.
10. Any other comments.

Appendix C – Audience Questionnaire/Interview Schedule

1. Why did you come to see *Merlin's Child*?
2. What things most impressed you about the production?
3. Which moments of the performance will you most remember?
4. Do you think that the play had a message? What was it?
5. How well suited do you think the production was to the performance space? Give some examples.
6. How well did the production use music and sound?
7. Sum up what you thought of the production in 5 words.

Appendix D -

Practical Research Proposal: Theatre, Landscape and Memory, 2000 – ‘The Merlin’s Child proposal’.

In 1999, I undertook a practical research project at the Minack Theatre, Cornwall. The research proposal is included here as ‘The *Merlin’s Child* Project’ is a direct continuation.

Research proposal: Minack project, 1999

(Originally written by Sally Mackey in 1998; slightly altered over the year.)

In 1996, HEFCE defined research as:

“original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry, as well as to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performance and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction.”

My research:

After three years of researching a particular site-specific drama project, I have developed theories about the project in a research paper, ‘Drama, Landscape and Memory’ (Exeter, 1999). These theories arise out of, and impact upon, my practice as director/tutor of the project. The project this year has been set up to test these theories and to make them robust. The current practical research project is, therefore, an original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding about collaborative, site-specific, devised, open-air theatre. Additionally, it is designed to affect my own practice as a director/tutor of undergraduate and postgraduate drama education students. Once this is complete, the findings will be used in a further project in 2000.

The theories:

As a result of the early stages of research and a subsequent research paper, I suggest that, through an intensive site-specific theatre project, it is possible to give our student body a unique and important sense of being in place in a transient, unstable world. This sense of being in place acts as a permanent and constructive memory in their biography.

The sense of being in place is contrived from a number of factors:

A successful site-specific theatre piece

- Designed and devised for the space
- Music that is appropriate for the space in addition to the narrative and form
- Style of performance – ensemble, collective, utilising the landscape
- Building the narrative offstage
- Using archetypal narratives that reflect the archetypal landscape.

Identity with a community group

- Large group collaborative methods of devising under clear leadership
- Matching the collaborative underpinning of method within the narrative of the piece
- Building a history and tradition that each student feels part of – a sense of belonging
- Removing the group away from the everyday to the end of the country.

The Landscape

The majesty of the landscape (combination of nature and human contrivance) has a particular effect:

- Peaceful
- Secure

- Removal of the self through awareness of beauty
- Escape
- Return to the ideals of, perhaps, childhood.

It is the combination of all these that create a sense of being in place. Without one element, the sense of 'being in place' would lessen.

The practical research project:

This is the theory: **that if all the elements above combine successfully, our students will gain a sense of place that acts as a key positive memory in these most transient years.** The research project seeks to explore and test this theory. To do this, each element in the above list is being *overtly* addressed in the process and product with the intention of providing every possible opportunity for success of the project. Therefore, each of the different listed elements acts as an objective for the practical research project.

Criteria for assessing success:

A successful site-specific theatre piece

- That *Beware the Jabberwocky* is designed and devised for the space and that this is deemed to have been achieved successfully by visiting academics, reviewers, key audience members, past and present students, theatre staff.
- That the music and sounds for the production is deemed to enhance the space, the narrative and form by the same people.
- That the style of performance – ensemble, collective, utilising the landscape – is deemed to considerably support and enhance the production by the same people.
- That the production includes offstage extension to the narrative such that the piece has an inclusive, coherent narrative weaving through the whole work and the audience are aware of this extended performance of the narrative. (This includes working in the auditorium.) The same people would deem that this has taken place successfully.
- That the same people deem that archetypal narratives have been used, reflecting the archetypal landscape, yet ones that are interesting, entertaining and relevant to a contemporary audience and the performance company.

Identity with a community group

- That large group collaborative methods of devising under clear leadership have taken place such that the product reflects the success of the collective. The success of these methods would be judged by observers of the product (as above) and, in addition, would be recorded and summarised by a research assistant during the process to be included in a post-production document.
- That the themes of community and collaboration present in the process of the project are reflected with purpose and worth within the piece itself. This should be partly seen by the same people and recorded by a research assistant.
- That students across the year groups demonstrate pleasure in belonging to this community group with its history and traditions. Evidence for this will be recorded by the research assistant and summarised in the post-production document.
- That the removal to a remote part of the country is, visibly, a contributing factor to the quality of the experience.

The Landscape

That by comments, gesture, non-verbal expression and other means, students demonstrate that the landscape has many of the following effects on them: a sense of peace and/or security; an 'unselfing' engagement; constructive escape; a privileging of ideals. This will be judged by visiting academics where possible and by a record taken by the research assistant.

Other

In the way of practical research, it is likely that the project will raise other issues and matters of interest, of course. It is important to locate these as they happen and to address them accordingly.

Recording the project:

The project will be recorded in two ways.

1. A video of the main production.
2. A brochure/document will be produced recording the objectives of the project and responses to its success.

The future:

This practical research project has been designed to explore and test a theory about drama, landscape and memory. A mode of practice will be set up as a result of the findings of this research practice that will offer methods of collective, site-specific practice that will facilitate a sense of 'being in place' for students. The next practical research project will be designed to further test these theories by removing certain key elements (e.g. the particular theatre space, the location at the end of the country) but will retain others (e.g. collective devising, working in landscape).

The results of this practical research project have been recorded in the document *'The Minack Project': a Practical Research Project by Sally Mackey* written by Millie Taylor. The concluding section reads as follows:

Conclusion

It does seem that the combination of factors put in place for this project achieves its aim of giving the students involved in the Minack Project a unique and important sense of place which may well act as a permanent and constructive memory. Peter Woods identifies it as:

having the properties of a 'critical event' (see Woods, 1993). There are indications of

- *outstanding advances for students*
- *considerable staff change also*
- *preservation, renewal and confirmation functions (i.e. of ideals)*
- *having wider significance for drama and education*
- *promoting 'real' learning*
- *developing communitas*
- *influenced by critical agents and critical others. Among these, the leadership of the producer was clearly a strong factor. But I would also suggest that the Minack itself might be seen in this light.*

In conclusion, two sections from Tony Jackson's report sum up the student experience.

The experience was clearly, for all students I talked to, unique and greatly valued. Evidenced by the number of students who return each year to support the new production and its first year cast; and even to return for several years after graduation in stage management or other supervisory roles.

I did talk to several students who had been to the Minack for three or more years running, and for whom this project seemed to hold a special place in their lives, almost giving their year a shape! They talked glowingly about the different projects they had been involved with, how they had varied and yet how much common ground there was between them (dictated mainly by the nature of the performance space). The project was felt to be an excellent culmination of a year's work at college, it put the rest of the year into perspective, and if they were to remember anything of the degree programme the Minack projects would always be at the top of their agenda. (Tony Jackson)

A final mark of the success of the production is that the playtext of *Beware the Jabberwocky* is being published by London Drama in 2000.

The future

Whilst this cycle of research is complete, there is more to be done within this field. This practical research project has explored and confirmed, to some extent, the theories Sally Mackey has

suggested. These will be tested further, however, in her next practical research, *Merlin's Child*, to take place in ancient sites on the borderlands of England and Wales in August, 2000, with a graduate theatre education company from Central. (All but two of the company will have been through the Minack experience.) Certain of the givens will change: the precise composition of the community; the site/s; some of the tradition; the landscape. This will allow for a further case study of work in this field.

The *Merlin's Child* project, 2000

As stated above, this second case study will test the theories further. This practical research project is, therefore, an original investigation undertaken in order to gain further knowledge and understanding about collaborative, site-specific, devised, open-air theatre. Additionally, it is designed to affect my own practice as a director/tutor of undergraduate and graduate drama education students. The main theory has been slightly altered to encompass the graduate body.

The theory

As a result of early research, a subsequent research paper and a first practical research project, I suggest that, through an intensive site-specific theatre project, it is possible to give our student and graduate body a unique and important sense of being in place in a transient, unstable world. This sense of being in place acts as a permanent and constructive memory in their biography. This will be tested in 'The *Merlin's Child* Project'.

The context

In addition to its function as a second case study for my research on drama, landscape and memory, 'The *Merlin's Child* project' is a pilot project for a graduate theatre education company, CENTRed Theatre Company. (See appendix for CENTRed's mission statement.) It comprises:

- Forming a mainly graduate theatre company of approximately 30 people for the project that takes place in the summer, 2000;
- Creating and realising two weeks of primary schools interactive drama workshops held in June, 1999 and July, 2000 on the subject of 5th century Britain and the legends of Arthur;
- Devising, designing, making and performing *Merlin's Child: the legend of Arthur* for ten performances in eight different borderland ancient sites: Raglan Castle, Goodrich Castle, Caerleon Amphitheatre, Tintern Abbey, Chepstow Castle, Caldicot Castle, Skenfrith Castle and Abergavenny Castle;
- Offering five workshops during the August tour for families on a number of topics: physical theatre, beginners stage fighting, creating sound and music for the theatre, devising, storytelling.

The practical research

The project is constructed to further test the theories first tested in the practical research project, *Beware the Jabberwocky*, 1999. As such, the same criteria are being used (see above): a successful site-specific theatre piece; identifying with a community group; the landscape.

What will be particularly interesting is to identify any differences or similarities to the first practical research project that arise from the variant variables. There are a number of *invariant* variables, of course, under each of the criteria:

A successful site-specific theatre piece

- Designed and devised for the space;
- Music that is appropriate for the space, narrative and form;
- Style of performance – ensemble, collective, utilising the landscape;
- Building the narrative offstage;
- Using archetypal narratives that reflect the archetypal landscape.

Identity with a community group

- Large group collaborative methods of devising under clear leadership;
- Matching the collaborative underpinning of method within the narrative of the piece (although 'theme' would be a more appropriate term than 'narrative' in this project);

- Building a history and tradition that each student feels part of – a sense of belonging.

The Landscape

The majesty of the landscape (combination of nature and human contrivance) has a particular effect:

- Peaceful
- Secure
- Removal of self through awareness of beauty
- Escape
- Return to the ideals of, perhaps, childhood.

The following are invariant variables:

- The company is drawn from a number of different year groups rather than working within one or two undergraduate year groups. The majority have graduated (from summer 1996 to summer 2000). The majority (all but two) have performed with their year group at the Minack Theatre. Will this affect the community group and how will the identification with a community group evidence itself? How will the different traditions be drawn upon?
- The venues will be different. The *Beware the Jabberwocky* research project was rooted in the tradition of performing at the Minack Theatre in Cornwall. The *Merlin's Child* research project will be performed in a number of different venues. The project will therefore be *sites-specific* rather than *site-specific*. What will be the consequences of this?
- The company is removed from the everyday but not to the remote end of the country as they were with *Beware the Jabberwocky*. However, there is still the sense of liminality as we will be working on the borderlands of two countries (England and Wales). Will this affect the responses of the company? For example, will this 'new' area affect the sense of security and escape previously felt by participants going to a space with which they are familiar, if only second-hand?
- The production is not going into a theatre space; we will be creating a theatre space within the sites. What will the impact of this be?
- The tour has less intrinsic support. We are responsible for arranging the tour and building audience numbers to a certain extent. What effect does this have?
- The size of the company is smaller. The whole operation is taut. There are no satellite events that do not involve the company itself. How does this lack of bulk around the edges affect the participants' experience?
- This is not part of the undergraduate curriculum. None of the company is being assessed. The majority are professionals working on minimal payment for their participation. Some are taking holiday time to undertake the project. What impact does all this have?
- Many have moved on to become professionals in their own right. How will they handle the relationship with Central staff (including myself)? How does this affect their response to the project? How do the undergraduates respond to working with graduates?
- The content of the production (5th century Arthurian Britain) is closely linked with the area of the performances. Does this affect the company's experience?

Assessing the impact of the practical research project.

This project has been established to further test the theories first explored in the paper 'Drama, Landscape and Memory: to be is to be in place' (Mackey, 1999). Having established that the theories stand up in the first practical research project 'The *Beware the Jabberwocky* (BtJ) project', 1999, I am changing some of the variables. Because of this, it is not simply a matter of assessing the success of 'The *Merlin's Child*' project, as it first seemed to be with BtJ. Certainly, it would be useful to identify the success, or otherwise, of the various elements of the project as laid out for BtJ, particularly as I shall be employing a similar mode of practice. In addition, however, the post-project report should identify what impact the variant variables have had.

With this in mind, it is expected that the research will make use of the 'Criteria for assessing success' list, as appropriate (see above, p.2). In addition, the report will make reference to the impact of the variant variables, listed above, together with additional issues that may arise during the process of the project.

Recording the project:

The project will be recorded in two ways:

1. Parts of the process, parts of the workshop and two of the performances are being professionally filmed. The funding for editing has not been secured yet.
2. A post-project report will be produced recording the findings of the research project.

The future:

Clearly, future work lies in changing certain variables once again to further test the theory. For example, what would be the impact of such work if it were to be performed indoors? Another possibility for extending the work is to establish a longitudinal study using some of the first researchees as the subjects of the study to identify the long-term impact of 'being in place' through the combination of drama, landscape and memory.