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Ledger, Adam

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***Where's My Igloo Gone?: 'Trainings' for/in participatory performance for family audiences***

Adam J. Ledger, The Bone Ensemble/University of Birmingham

*Igloo* [a dwelling, not only of snow and ice]

A performance of The Bone Ensemble's *Where's My Igloo Gone?* cannot end unless everyone participates.<sup>1</sup> Together, audience members build a fabric structure that becomes a new home for the central characters, Oolik and Oomam. Everyone is welcomed inside this newly created igloo. In the Inuit languages, the word 'igloo' does not necessarily mean a dome-shaped ice house, but a shelter, a home, however constructed...

*Yowka* [Iglooish; us, our, everyone]

*Where's My Igloo Gone?* is a participatory performance for children 5+ and their families. It is about climate change, home and taking action. We have a strong interest in voice and music; we don't use English, but a made up language called 'Iglooish'. The work is also accessible to d/Deaf and non-English speaking audiences through a double strategy of this created language and very clear physicality.

*Yayat!* [Iglooish; come on; get a grip; let's go!]

When I think about the process of developing and devising *Where's My Igloo Gone?*, 'training' becomes an expanded definition of the term. 'Training' is often understood as professional formation in the context of a particular conception of what acting may demand:

it typically concerns the acquisition of skills and the embodiment of ability (and sensibility). Participatory performance – and, in our case, involving a range of ages, especially children, and a diverse audience – might require certain skills beyond fundamental performing technique. If theatre is participatory, then it is pretty definitely going to require close up relationships with strangers, inside a performative set up. The place of performance becomes another kind of igloo, the ‘home’ of the action in which both performers and spectators involve themselves.

Prior to a performance, rehearsal may demand that new and particular skills are learnt according to a production. But in a more general sense, I think rehearsal can be considered ‘training’, and I mean that it is a repeated development and practise - and practice - of the ability to share the work. (Etymologies can be misleading, but ‘train’ has something to do with pathways and sequences. Perhaps training, and therefore rehearsal, is a pathway of sequences that can, in the French sense of rehearse, be *répétition*). If I can stretch the metaphor a bit, rehearsal takes place in another kind of igloo, a shelter away from the look (and touch) of the future audience.

How did we know what to do and that we were doing it well?

*Geeloog* [Iglooish; the world]

Artistic practice has begun to respond to environmental concerns, but can offer negative, apocalyptic scenarios. Climate change is quite a complex and sometimes abstract problem, so, with *Where’s My Igloo Gone?*, we aimed to create a clear, ultimately positive story, with elements of participation and personalisation.

When her home begins to melt, Oolik and her mum, Oomam, become climate refugees (a very real consequence of contemporary climate change). Oolik journeys to find out what has caused the changes around her, gaining knowledge and trying to do something about what has happened. She meets a set of animals (including a flatulent-sounding

Walrus), is caught in a storm and confronts an oil company boss. She meets a scientist, Ting Tang Zood, quirky, charming and a bit silly, who doesn't speak Iglooish but the fizz-pop language of 'science'. Participation is threaded through this action.

[suggest image 1 here]

Borrowing Augusto Boal's term, Mark Chou and colleagues confirm the humanising potential of participatory work, which includes 'spect-actors. ... able to enter into direct dialogue with each other and with the lives of the individuals dramatised'.<sup>2</sup> Oolik is, quite deliberately, a central character we can empathise with; she is a sort of vicarious climate change activist who can also speak directly to the young people and adults around her.

Our strategy of participation is also political in that it shows that we can all do something to help and we can all work together. It's an attempt to offer an empowering treatment of the difficult area of climate change.

*Fiergeet* [Iglooish; friends]

The story of *Where's My Igloo Gone?* is really a pretty classic quest, but its enactment is audience-facing, theatrical, and seeks always to – actually – unseat its spectators, who are always acknowledged in the space. They are not just audience members but (another term) 'participant-spectators'.<sup>3</sup>

But we can't just put our young spectators and their families inside a complex, fictive environment right away and expect them happily to get involved (something that more immersive practices may better achieve). Audiences aren't always used to being 'spect-actors', so need also to be aided ('trained'?) in how to get involved.

What has emerged in our work is a set of participatory strategies, or modes, of involvement, which develop. We move from simply clapping along to a song, to adding a sound effect with voices or simple musical instruments, to participant-spectators each drawing a picture of their own homes (their 'igloos'). Then a few, then all spectators are

involved in sequences; some help Oolik catch the drips from her melting igloo, but everyone shouts at the money-obsessed Oil Boss.

A difference with some Theatre- or Drama-in-Education practices and our work is that our spectators aren't placed in a role. They are in the here and now of the action as themselves. By the end of the show, everyone is prepared (enabled, ready; trained) to stage a protest, where their igloo drawings are brandished at the Politician character. As Chou et al add, 'the arts ... produce a more compete version of ourselves and our communities. ... They are the formative expression of what is yet to come'.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps our audiences will take action, protest, against the 'yet to come'.

[suggest image 2 here]

Overall, the instructions (the training) of how to participate are embedded in the performance material itself and led by the performers as a dramaturgy of participation. This is what Gareth White calls 'procedural authorship'.<sup>5</sup> We have had to find ways to be clear, open, purposefully inviting rather than requiring or demeaning; there is a difference between exploitative 'audience participation' and participatory performance. Procedural authorship means you have to *proceed* carefully, step by step (the meaning of 'train', again).

Building on the learning of our previous participatory performance, *Caravania!*, we attend to the 'moment' of relating to the spectator, clarity of explanation or invitation; charm.<sup>6</sup> In the shelter of rehearsal, this is difficult to train for as only I was free to step in, inventing all sorts of names and ages. So in the first phase of development, we also took part of the emerging work to a local primary school, then again in later rehearsal in order to test it (train ourselves) by putting the material amid (not, crucially, in front of) an audience.

The participatory aspects had to be looked out for over the course of early performances; actual shows become a training in doing this aspect 'better', but it requires attention to a re-doing, afresh, each time.

*Foomfoom* [Iglooish; to mend, fix, sort out]

Caroline Parker came to rehearsal. She is a deaf performer with a forensic eye for physical detail. She lip reads and signs. Her session with us was a training in drawing in space. She showed us that we need to put the hook (a crooked finger) on the end of Oolik's fishing line having first traced the (mimed) rod and line; we needed to touch and react to the (imaginary) spear's sharp point. Caroline taught us that signs can show distance; this was a training by copying her way of showing dogs running with her hands as paws, but how the performer can indicate how the dogs run into the distance by using just two fingers, then one, on each hand to show size. A bird can come closer by creating its shape with first the fingers then the whole hand.

I realised that Caroline sees the world not differently but 'reads' it more closely.

Caroline's practical input offered a training to do with specialist skills acquisition; it is not a training for the performer *per se*, but predicated on the nature of our audience and the possible aesthetics to reach it. I am struck that training often starts from the other end of that relationship; we spend hours refining our individual psychophysicalities in order better to encounter material and relive the act of performance, but rarely on the terms of how we might encounter and relate to a (particular) audience.

Later, we took part of the show in rehearsal to a local school for the Deaf, where we asked for feedback from the children and teachers. As here, training may take you out of a comfort zone in terms of rehearsal environment too, but, in our case, reassured us that the piece worked, it was clear, and that there were definite bits that could be worked on. This kind of road-testing can offers a learning that can be fed back into the rehearsal – the evolving *répétition* - of the work itself.

[suggest image 3 here]

*Dowdela* [Iglooish; goodbye]

Sculptor Anthony Gormley asks, 'is it possible to re-think art and take it from this finished-object status and make it into a verb, a participatory, open space, a place of transformation and the exchange of ideas and reflection on our state and status?'.<sup>7</sup> If art, and specifically performance, is a verb, then we have to address how we are best able to enact (do) participation. We can consider training as not just the gaining of fundamental skill, but acquiring new ways of doing. Testing and evaluation, and cumulative ability, enfolds the 'what' and the 'how', as well as checking it is done well, into the process of making the work. In performance, 'training' extends also to aiding an audience to participate.

We can shift the imperatives and definitions of training from the performer or material to the needs and presence of our spectators.

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<sup>1</sup> *Where's My Igloo Gone?* is produced by The Bone Ensemble in partnership with MAC Birmingham and the Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton, with funding from Arts Council England, several Trusts, and the University of Birmingham. It is performed by Jill Dowse and Sam Frankie Fox, designed by Claire Browne and directed by Adam Ledger.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, and Lesley Pruitt, "Putting participation on stage: examining participatory theatre as an alternative site for political participation", *Policy Studies*, 36: 6 (2015): 607-22 (609).

<sup>3</sup> Deirdre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan, "Come Closer: Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22:1 (February 2012): 120-133 (121).

<sup>4</sup> Chou et al., "Putting participation on stage ...", 609.

<sup>5</sup> Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Adam J. Ledger, "Caravana!: Intimacy and Immersion for Family Audiences", James Frieze, Ed., *Reframing Immersive Theatre: the Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 145-150.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Gormley, "Art in the time of global warming", *Long Horizons: an Exploration of Art and Climate Change*, Julie's Bicycle and the British Council (n.d.): 15.