

## Plaza Real: Re-imagining Urban Spaces of Cultural Resistance

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Sydney is a place congested: with high rise and traffic, construction and pollution, with mass marketing and identities, anxiety and possibility. As the body is contorted in this over-crowded space, movement, against the flow, towards others, becomes an act of resistance. *Plaza Real*, a physical theatre work from Urban Theatre Projects and Branch Nebula, re-imagined in that icon of urban life, the mall, a point in which the entanglements of a contemporary multicultural city, often transient and always complex, are reflected in bodies on a stage; enfolding around each other, breaking apart and coming together again.

Invited to be a critical eye at early rehearsals, but with no background in theatre, a kind of dramaturg with L plates, I was looking for the usual themes: the big critique of the dehumanising city, the panopticon state and its corporate handmaidens who mass market desire and identity to mask emptiness. But the creative team behind *Plaza Real*, I found out only later, believed the mall to be a very different place. Through analogies and metaphors, the mall serves another purpose that resists the very thing it is purported to create: it becomes a re-appropriated space of sociability, of connection, and even of love, as a form of subaltern cultural resistance to the directives and constraints on where and how we move within its space.

Lee Wilson, the director and a performer in the work, wanted to avoid the didactic and deliberately chose to focus on people, the anonymous bodies whose conversations we overhear in coffee shops and whose lives we wonder about just as they are wondering about ours sitting at another table. Wilson didn't want to tell people to go out and boycott malls. Instead he wanted us to see "one of the most communal places we have. *Plaza Real* was about seeing the beauty and humanity of people there".

The currency of *Plaza Real* is its combination of movement, dance and theatre that reflects "the underlying tensions, misunderstandings, and moments of tenderness" that make up our public spaces, our malls, our streets and our beaches. The Plaza became a plausible place where a diverse cast of social and cultural backgrounds might meet. Beginning as an ensemble piece, ideas and movement were played with and improvised. The process of creation lasted over ten weeks with accidents and randomness becoming embedded in the work. There was the vexed question of how the director distinguishes between the dramaturg's aesthetic and their own, and there is the onerous task of culling pieces that will never make it to the final performance. I still miss the lonely dance of a janitor and his broom.

The final work was a sound and light show from the beginning, focusing on the act of looking, voyeurism if you like, at strangers in a mall who now use that corporate space as theatre. In the mall we turn up the volume on our mannerisms, and make ourselves louder and shinier, code switching between vernaculars of Arabish or Chinglish, shifting and constructing identities in the process: picking and choosing from the array of products and brand names on offer that are then subverted, rearranged, refashioned or remixed. In the food court we graze, fossicking, rummaging and parading, collectively distilled and individually amplified simultaneously. The spruiker exhorts us to 'swim naked in a pool of chocolate', outlining all our utopian fantasies and the dreams that are possible. But the sound is like wall paper; it becomes meaningless in its endless repetition, which, like Warhol's artefacts, flattens significance, wearing it away to nothingness. Spewed out repetition in a dreamy monotone voice forces the audience to lean in to catch what's being said.

Warhol is an underlying influence in the work. The beauty is in the mundane, reinterpreted as a fetishised object, giving back new meaning to that which has been diminished. In *Plaza Real* you can always see the crudeness around the edges, the rubbish in a bin, floating plastic bags, violence when a mock fight, a sneering look, becomes a push becomes a punch. In this detritus of modern life, in our garbage, literally in one part of the performance, is the genesis of human connection.

There is tension in the performance not only for the themes that it tackles but for its intended impact on the audience. We are never allowed to forget that this is not a literal recreation of community, or the mall. It is still the here and now of theatre within the inner city's Performance Space. For Wilson it is not about entertainment. "Pure entertainment is just about the impact. Audiences at the STC are going to be entertained. You can't fuck with the structure. The audience would be confused". *Plaza Real*, on the other hand, deliberately chose to play with audience expectations about how a

theatrical piece should be structured, the conventions to fill in a certain way, the use of light and sound and how work should finish. From the very opening there is the irritation of grating plastic amplified on microphones, layers of noise building on each other, and a space that creates an atmosphere through performance rather than lighting which is stripped to bare essentials.

The performance was allusive, however, despite its loudness. Later conversations with Wilson made me rethink the meaning of the work, in that its reflections were much more about feeling: finding each other through the sense of skin on skin, soft bodies on hard surfaces of a gathering storm of emotions interspersed with wisps of nostalgia for our own time as mall rats or for those moments when we still sit in coffee shops just to watch. "It's important people feel something but what that is should not be one particular thing", according to Wilson. The audience were called on to make their own associations as an intellectual understanding and an emotional connection was necessary. Yet ultimately the performance was messing with what feelings the audience should walk away with.

These tensions between ideas of art and entertainment perhaps reflect wider rifts between the guilty pleasures of the mall (think low brow, disposable pop-culture), which in some ways *Plaza Real* celebrates, and that which is designated by others as being good for us. While we seem powerless to resist the exhortations of our consumer culture, the very act of gathering depicted in *Plaza Real* it could be argued is resisting the centrifugal, individualising, tendencies of a city like Sydney. Therefore, rather than denigrating this space, it is important to rethink its place in the social framework of the urban. The ability to form relationships in a place that is ostensibly soulless, even if these relationships are transitory, is still the culmination of human contact.

The work represented another form of resistance in its intention to extend theatre practice and to defy some of its conventions. The pleasure for the creators of *Plaza Real* was in confronting the audience but ultimately its short run was disappointing. As an outsider I see all that time and money and no tour; the piece committed to memory instead. From Wilson's point of view there was a need to run it again to adjust and perfect the performance, in much the same way as we adjust in public space: taking a side step to avoid too deep an incursion into someone else's comfort zone (but just enough to make them think), making eye contact to establish trust (with an audience) with a stranger, and developing social competencies (to satirise) to communicate our objections and our assent.

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