The Builders Association

Super Vision (2005)

Digital dataflow and the synthesis of everything

Andy Lavender

The new-spec practitioners

It was an easy decision to seek to observe The Builders Association for this book. My first encounter with the company’s work was seeing Jet Lag at the Barbican Theatre, London, in 2000. I was struck by its precise bravado. Here was a crafted meld of performance, scenic design, sound and video, applied to a resonant concept and brought off with a cool commitment. This looked like a very modern sort of theatre – pleasurable in the intelligent play of its ideas, staging solutions and mixing of media. What was obvious, too, was that an experiment was afoot. The Builders Association seemed interested in meaning, narrative and emotional contour (not necessarily the priorities of all postmodern performance practitioners), whilst rampantly exploiting audio-visual technologies, the stuff of contemporary communications, in order better to tell its stories. The work resonated like a contemporary harmonic: collaborative creation, deconstructed narration, technological adaptation and aestheticised mediation. How was it
made? What were its principles? What could it teach us, by way of what it was and was not?

Founded in 1994, The Builders Association is a New York-based company that makes what might be described as ‘theatre-plus’.¹ The shape of a signature starts to form across the early productions. The company’s inaugural project, Master Builder (1994), based on Ibsen’s play, was set in a partially-constructed three-storey house, marooned on the stage like an atoll with, inside, the odd TV monitor mediating faces. The White Album (1995) wryly fused references to the Beatles’ eponymous classic and Noel Coward’s Blithe Spirit. Imperial Motel (Faust) (1996), the company’s first international co-production (with the Theater Neumarkt, Zurich), remediated an array of sources deriving from and including Goethe’s play. The company subsequently refined this work in Jump Cut (Faust) (1997), which satisfied itself merely with Murnau’s film Faust (1926) and John Jeserun’s latter-day rendition.

Across these pieces is a deliberate deconstruction of classical and canonical material, continual location of productions in a very present cultural moment, and a focus on mediation as much as content. The multimedia fusion (sound, video, performance and architectonic design) helps bring the subject matter of the pieces to a state of resonant jeopardy, as it simultaneously magnifies, ironises and undercuts the material. It provides the shows with another signature feature: they dwell on ways in which contemporary communications technologies shape and define one’s life within a culture.
The latter theme has risen to the fore in more recent productions. With *Jet Lag* (1998, with architects Diller + Scofidio), The Builders Association left the fictional havens provided by Ibsen, Goethe and (in a 1998 workshop) O’Neill to devise a series of reality-based shows. The company also embarked on what would be the first of several interdisciplinary collaborations with partners outside theatre. *Jet Lag* draws on actual (and most peculiar) incidents concerning travel of different kinds and sets something of a template for subsequent projects, cleverly interrelating actual and fictional circumstances, pre-recorded digital graphics and live video projection of the performers.

By the time the company produced *Alladeen* (2003) in collaboration with motiroti, the London-based Asian dance company led by Keith Khan, it was established internationally as a purveyor of classy multimedia spectaculars. *Alladeen* focused on the work of individuals in an international call centre in Bangalore, who are trained to speak and converse like Americans. In the same year the company’s *Avanti: a Postindustrial Ghost Story*, a site-specific performance in the old Deluxe Sheet Metal Factory near the Studebaker factory in South Bend, unpacked a story of decline and change in America’s industrial belt. *Continuous City* (2007- ) explores contemporary urban environments across continents (fieldwork embraces Mumbai, Lagos and Mexico City) with the electronically-facilitated involvement of spectators who are variously co-present and geographically remote.

*Super Vision* (2005) falls within the scope of these latter pieces. Characteristically, they grapple with large-scale social trends. They turn to
relevant technological forms – video diary, radio logs, geo-mobile telecommunications, internet calling – figuring these thematically and theatricality as resources for multimedia performance. The warp of contemporary communications is worked into the weft of the shows themselves.

Artistic director Marianne Weems has directed all The Builders Association's productions to date. Weems was a dramaturg with the Wooster Group prior to establishing her own company, to which she brought a commitment to continual mediation of the bodies and voices that we see and hear on stage. This inheritance entails what Kim Whitener, a producer with both companies, describes as 'a little sensitivity – because the world out there has generally pronounced the Builders' work as a kind of second generation of the Wooster Group. And no-one wants to be considered a follower.'

Certainly Weems' post-Wooster theatre is intrinsically different from that of her erstwhile colleagues, in spite of the trace inheritance. There is a turn towards larger-scale pieces, more coherent narrative structures and a deliberate engagement with cultural and social themes. There are different modes of mediation – usually video projection on large rear cycloramas – and a more restless embrace of softwares in pursuit of what Weems describes as 'the presence of the technology and letting that be the protagonist'. As Wooster Group director Elizabeth LeCompte says, Weems' visual world 'is much more spectacular than mine. She takes structure from television and music video. It's a hybrid, a new genre entirely.' That slightly overstates the case, although the synthesised mixedness of The Builders Association's work confers a distinct identity. In fashioning her
hybrid, Weems herself is something of a compound: a mix of a European
dramaturg-director, big on background research, theme and structure; and an
old-style American show(wo)man, presenting modish high-tech spectacles with pizzazz.

**Contexts for Super Vision**

Made in New York, *Super Vision* was decidedly unparochial. The project was
coproduced by the Wexner Center for the Arts in association with the Advanced
Computer Center for the Arts and Design at The Ohio State University, the
Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Liverpool (under its European Capital of Culture
2008 banner), the Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival, the New
Zealand International Arts Festival, and the Mondavi Center for the Performing
Arts, University of California, Davis. This is a show made to travel, and meant to
make a splash around the US and at international festivals around the world. Its
themes must be sufficiently accommodating to suit the show’s touring footprint.
 Likewise its aesthetic configurations must appear new and exciting. The package
– common on the international festival circuit – is of necessary performance
innovation within a signature that guarantees brand identity.

In developing *Super Vision* the Builders Association undertook another
major collaboration, following successful partnerships with Diller + Scofidio and
motiroti. In this instance the main partner was dbox, an agency specialising in
graphic design, animation and brand development, in particular in the luxury
property sector. The two companies had previously worked together when dbox
provided animations for Jet Lag and Alladeen, after which James Gibbs, a dbox director, expressed his interest in being involved from the outset in any future collaboration. ‘It’s unusual for a design company like ours to be seeking challenges like Super Vision,’ says Gibbs. ‘It’s not something that’s going to develop into a business for us. But it’s a way of keeping the studio fresh.’

Weems and Gibbs started discussing the project in 2003. ‘James suggested the idea of surveillance as a field that we were both very interested in,’ Weems recounts. ‘And surveillance and the theatre being a natural match … I started to research the data body and started looking at this more invisible form of surveillance.’ Her research included John McGrath’s book Loving Big Brother: Surveillance Culture and Performance Space in which, as she recounts, McGrath mentioned ‘the idea that we are shadowed by an electronic doppelganger’.

Weems soon thought of this as ‘dataveillance’, a term that took root as (ostensibly) the thematic core of the show. It conjures the vapour trail that is left by credit card exchanges, mobile phone communications, visits to doctors, hotels, theatres – anything that allows a mark to be made on an electronic system that is then ripe for scrutiny and perhaps policing. The project had found its starting point.

**Phases of development**

With dataveillance as its theme, Super Vision was developed in a series of workshops. A ten-day phase, hosted by the Wexner Centre in Columbus, Ohio, in July 2004, principally focused on design ideas and content development. It
was attended by Stewart Laing, a Scottish director-designer who had previously worked on Richard Jones’s Broadway production of *Titanic* (1997); Chris Kondek, video designer on previous Builders projects (who subsequently withdrew from this one); Dan Dobson, the company’s sound designer; two performers (Tanya Selvaratnam and Joe Silovski, who is also the company’s technical manager); and two writers who subsequently left the project. This initial sketching was followed by a ten-day workshop that principally addressed the generation of text, held in New York in November 2004.

‘There was this huge pool of dramaturgical information about data’, says Weems, ‘but it took us that long to find three stories that we really liked and believed in. So that resulted in a very small invited reading. It was weird – the first and only time I’ll ever do that. We didn’t even have microphones, we were just in a room, reading, it was terrible, but people liked it.’

The three storylines may have been identified, but the writing team left the project after this phase. Weems was after what she describes as ‘a metaphorical level’, at which point she hired Constance De Jong, a writer and performance artist best known as the librettist for Philip Glass’s opera *Satyagraha: M.K. Gandhi in South Africa* (1981). ‘This kind of group, what the end product is and what the process is, does not ask for a playwright,’ says De Jong. Nevertheless, for its next concentrated phase of development, a two-week workshop in March 2005 at The Kitchen (a performance venue in westside Manhattan), the company worked with a script that De Jong and Weems had prepared. As Weems acknowledges, this marked ‘a huge difference’ from the company’s usual
improvisation-based process. The workshop entailed the full-size realisation of a ‘draft’ version of the set and a set-up for video projection. There were two additional performers, regular collaborators Kyle deCamp and Rizwan Mirza, along with video designer Peter Flaherty (who had worked on *Alladeen*).

This phase was not without its tensions. The company planned to present a showcase of its work at the end of the fortnight to an invited audience that would include potential funders. During work on a particularly vexing scene De Jong lamented ‘the stupid pressure of the deadline of Saturday’. Weems, however, was at pains to insist that the showcase would be an opportunity to share some shapes and ideas rather than present finished stagings. The ‘pressure of the deadline’ means that decisions are made more swiftly. It suits a process that depends upon concretising the work in three dimensions. And it allows for feedback to be garnered that will inform future development.

A further two-week workshop followed at St Ann’s Warehouse in Dumbo, Brooklyn in September 2005, culminating in two performances to invited audiences. By this stage the cast had been consolidated by the addition of David Spence and Moe Angelos. This, in effect, was the final phase of development, entailing detailed realisation of the production prior to its get-in and first performances at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis in October.

[Circles of collaboration]
It is usual in theatre-making for a team of individuals, each with their own specialism, to work together in the realisation of a production. The Builders Association, however, features a deeply embedded form of team-working that offers a good deal of creative leeway to many participants. The hierarchy is fairly flat, although Weems is clearly in charge. She works by way of facilitation, negotiation, questioning and occasional task-setting rather than auteur-like diktat. She goes through a forthcoming day’s schedule at the Kitchen, for instance, then asks, ‘What else? Questions, answers, thoughts, feelings?’ The company is encouraged to share concerns or ideas. After a run of a scene that’s been rehearsed, Weems asks, ‘Thoughts, feelings? Want to try anything, look at anything different?’ She runs the rehearsal room as a facilitator.

The group also works according to what production manager Neil Wilkinson describes as ‘different circles of collaboration’. On Super Vision, accordingly, those circles are constituted by the director and the dbox team; the set, sound and video designers; the technical and production managers. This describes a set of inter-articulating groups, working loosely in small cells towards the realisation of an overarching vision. Wilkinson describes the work of his circle as that of moderation, given that ‘the technology often fights each other’ – lighting, video and scenic arrangements require careful dovetailing. This necessitates a committed process of ongoing communication and, often, personal compromise on the part of the designers.

In this instance, the performers are less intrinsic to the development of the work. As Silovsky observes, ‘there’s so much focus on the technology that the
actual acting is hurt. There’s not really much focus left over to figure out what the actors are doing.’ ‘Hurt’ may indeed be the right term here, but I suspect that rather depends on your preferences. It is true that in the phases I observed the performers were required to deliver pre-scripted material without much – if any – work on back-story or underlying actions, the stuff of conventional characterisation. Instead their work in rehearsal was largely to do with calibrating movements, timings and tone. This seems inevitable in a process so determined by the task of integrating design elements in a synchronous whole. It makes for a certain evenness to the mode of acting, which forms a useful counterpoint to the different sorts of mediation in play (‘flat’ performance gets coloured differently by mediation) but arguably means that the shows do not make themselves available to a fuller range of emotional resonances. Perhaps, too, a diminution of the performers’ creative input on this show is symptomatic of a company gestation where relationships are rebalanced in every project, with significant above-the-title collaborators – in this instance, dbox – affecting the internal dynamics of the creative process.

The stories

Super Vision begins with a prologue. A representative from Claritas (a market research company), played by Tanya Selvaratnam, addresses the audience, noting how it can be segmented following analysis of its credit card transactions in booking tonight’s tickets along with other demographic markers. This opening catches the audience a little off-guard – it looks as though personal details have
already been processed by the production team — and establishes the 
dataveillance theme in a savvy and ironic way.

The show then sets in motion three separate narratives. The first concerns 
the upper-middle-class Fletchers, Carol (Kyle deCamp), John Sr. (David Pence) 
and their son John Jr. (Owen Philip, who appears by way of video projection 
rather than in person). The family lives in an upscale, expensively furnished 
house whose virtual interiors, designed by dbox, are projected on an expansive 
rear cyclorama. John Sr. Is usually at his workstation, where he digitally adapts 
his son’s identity to create false bank accounts and multiple trades. His remote 
adventuring spirals out of control until he flees the family home and ends yet 
more remotely in the arctic, where a horde of data, initially appearing as a bird-
like flock in the distance, swarms around him.

The second narrative concerns a Ugandan-Asian businessman who 
travels in and out of the US. Each scene has the same set-up: an exchange 
between the businessman and a Transportation Security Administration 
(passport or border control) officer. Rizwan Mirza plays the businessman from 
onstage. Joe Silovsky plays a variety of officers from the desk that runs along the 
forestage, changing character in a playful riff of adaptations by way of hairstyle, 
facial hair and eyewear. He performs to a camera directly facing him, with his 
image located in a passport control booth that appears on a screen onstage (see 
figure 1.1). The officers latch on to the merest hint of behaviour that might be 
construed as terrorist-like and seem to know everything about the businessman, 
from his cholesterol level to his sleeping requirements when booking hotels. This
storyline resolves with the businessman slowly walking across the stage, remarking that ‘now I profile in the US as one of your movers and shakers’, meanwhile trailing personal data by way of a video projection that accumulates behind him like a dragnet.

The third narrative concerns Jen (Tanya Selvaratnam), a young Asian woman based in New York, and her grandmother in Sri Lanka (Moe Angelos). The pair converse by webchat. Jen is located at a workstation (with a camera) onstage, so that when she faces upstage to look at her computer monitor her own face is projected, as if on webcam, onto a screen onstage. Angelos sits at the desk on the forestage, also facing a camera, her image similarly projected. In a series of video-link conversations, we understand that Jen is helping her grandmother sort out the deeds to her house whilst digitally archiving family photos that trigger various reminiscences. Over the course of the piece the grandmother’s mental coherence disintegrates through (we presume) the onset of Alzheimer's Disease, figured here by a fracturing of the image of Angelos’s face on the screen (see figure 1.2).

In the scenes between grandmother and granddaughter, and businessman and TSA officer, the performers connect by way of live mediation rather than direct eye-contact, in a staging that performs both corporeal presence and virtuality, separation and conjunction. The relation is always to the mediating apparatus (the camera, the screen, the microphone) as much as to the fellow actor.
‘I’ve done this kind of work a lot’, says Angelos, ‘but each time you do it you still have to deal with the foreignness of it. … I’m seated, and I have a tight shot on me. So it’s very small what I’m doing, a lot of the time. … It’s similar [to film acting] in that we have to hit a mark, we have to be someplace very precise for the camera to catch us, because otherwise you’re not in the scene!’ The performers’ voices are amplified by small radio mics. ‘That’s lovely, actually,’ says Angelos. ‘You can be much more subtle. It’s more sensitive and powerful, of course, to have your voice projected in a big way.’

The three storylines are interwoven but otherwise connected only by virtue of their contribution to the overarching thematic, concerning the exploitation of digital data and communication technologies. By the time I observe the workshops at the Kitchen and St Ann’s Warehouse, then, the narratives are fairly consolidated and the work focuses more on their hypermedia staging.

‘What we’ve been doing here is creating atmospheres,’ says Kyle Decamp at the end of the workshop at the Kitchen. At this point, halfway through a development process, what challenges need to be cracked? ‘The basic question,’ responds deCamp. ‘What is the relationship of these contemporary people to the ongoing, galloping situation of data?’ An answer to this question – and perhaps a constraint in addressing it – lay in the ways the company wrestled with its design domain.
A set for spectating

One of the first ideas for the set for *Super Vision* was a large curved deck that would open to reveal pockets or gaps in which scenes would take place (see figures 1.3 and 1.4). This required a series of moving elements that posed difficulties for a touring show. Weems asked set designer Stewart Laing to conceive something radically different. His response entailed a narrow performance strip running the width of the stage. This was backed by a large cyclorama for rear projection, with a front wall of sliding panels that could reveal and conceal the performers and also act as projection surfaces (see figures 1.5 and 1.6). The actors, then, would perform between two planes of digital images (see figure 1.7). The downstage panels would be housed within an aperture, so that the audience had a sense of watching the action through a sort of large letterbox.

This configuration was set up for the workshop at the Kitchen. It posed a number of challenges. How many projectors were required, front and back? How large and what proportions should the aperture be? How many sliding panels would be best, and what material should they be made from? How would they be
operated? And, as Laing observed later, ‘could we afford to project that amount of imagery, just in terms of square feet?’

At the start of the workshop there are three sliding panels, along with a scrim (a fine gauze) across the front of the aperture that allows you to see everything illuminated behind it but also acts as a large projection surface. Laing proposes that there be four sliding screens, rather than three (two made from perspex, two from black gauze). ‘Why did you decide that?’ asks Jennifer Tipton. Laing observes that the smaller screens are better for touring. ‘Only it's nice to have a centre,’ Tipton suggests. Weems asks Wilkinson to mock up a panel that is seven feet wide. Wilkinson promises it for the next day.

Silovski and Wilkinson discuss means of fixing and operating the panels. ‘There's only one instance where they don’t move simultaneously,’ says Silovski.

‘That’s gonna change,’ says Wilkinson. ‘And I’d rather design something that allowed for the possibility of change.’ This is exactly the sort of production management – problem-solving, generous, accommodating – that this sort of process requires.

Sightlines are a problem: not everyone in the auditorium can see the rear screen through the aperture. Its proposed dimensions are currently 28 feet by 7 feet. Laing suggests altering this to 24x8, noting that at its most extreme a cinemascope screen entails a width to height ration of three to one. Weems is cautious about compromising the wide, non-televisual architecture of the frame. Later that afternoon, Wilkinson and Silovski resize the frame to 24x8.

Developments in thinking are quickly made concrete in the space and tested in
real terms as soon as possible. Later the next day, Weems notes her and Laing’s view that the 24x8 aperture is not workable.

The set design and system for video projection require budgetary consolidation. Wilkinson reports at a company meeting that the projected expenditure on set is currently $35,000, whilst the available budget is $30,000 (approximately £17,000). Whitener urges the production team to be creative in finding ways to keep within budget targets.

Flaherty reports on a series of options for projectors, including expensive models that can be refocused in mid-performance. Three projectors with a focal length of 18 feet would cost $29,000 – Flaherty’s entire budget for video. Four consumer-level (lower-specification) projectors cost only $7,000. And a good deal of the budget needs to be assigned for software. One prospect is that the front projectors will be located on small stands on the floor in front of the audience. Whitener observes, ‘We can’t be in a situation where we find it doesn’t work in the house, where we’ve got to lose seven or eight seats [to make it fit]. I’ve already had producers of Alladeen saying that it should be in the contract that we won’t lose seats [so that the venue can maximise seat sales if the show sells out]. That’s bad news.’ As Flaherty points out, the location of the projectors will need to be ‘part of the footprint of the set and part of the design’.

Laing observes that the budget would be alleviated if a recent idea to use electric glass for two of the panels were dropped, saving $6,000. The glass can be both opaque (so will become a projection surface) or transparent. Weems had
been keen on using it. She concedes that it might go, looking like she is sucking on a lemon.

The following day the company explores fabrics for the front panels and scrim. There is much interest in an industrial material called textalene, a robust plastic sheeting with small oblong holes, which is used for garden furniture or as a wrapping around building sites. It acts like heavy-duty theatrical gauze. It takes a front-projected image as though it were a solid screen, but is sufficiently transparent so that if anyone behind it is illuminated they are clearly visible to the audience.

‘That’s really basic nineteenth-century theatre technology that we’re using,’ says Laing, referring to the gauzes of yore. ‘Which is nice.’ At this point the company considers using two screens in either textalene or LCD glass, and two that are solid. It also intends to remove the rear cyclorama to reveal (carried over from Laing’s previous design concept) a steeply curved stage raking from floor to ceiling. This will be the arctic expanse to which John Sr. escapes, providing a summative moment of scenic transformation (another echo, perhaps, from the nineteenth century) (see figure 1.8). The team needs to work out how to remove the projectors that are behind the rear screen, so that they are not in view at the ‘reveal’ – by raising (‘flying’) them, for instance.

‘What about the houses that have no flying?’ asks Weems.

‘We’ll just have to make something,’ says Wilkinson, with sangfroid.

Weems asks that the rear screen is rigged, ‘so that we get used to the idea that the space isn’t permanently open’. It’s an important principle that you see
things as the audience will see them, even in rough scratch phases of the process. It sounds simple, but what you see is what you get.

[Figure 1.8 near here]

How were these various issues resolved by the time of the workshop at St Ann’s? After the phase at the Kitchen, Laing built a model determining various configurations and sent it over from the UK. The dimensions of the aperture are now 30 feet by 10 feet – much better for sightlines, and nonetheless a distinctive ‘wide-screen’ configuration. There is no scrim across the front, and there are five sliding panels (each 6 feet wide), rather than four – so the panels have a centre. They are all made of textalene. They have a new electrical mechanism that allows for more precise gliding and stopping, and an operator who, in an enticing mix of old and new technologies, has electrical tape marking his TV monitor. This shows a shot of the stage. The tape on his screen indicates where he needs to position the panels for various scenes.

The arctic reveal, logistically complicated with its additional stage construction and flying projectors, has been cut. Instead the snowy waste is depicted by way of a video projection across the rear screen. There are three rear projectors covering the whole of the cyclorama, and two at the front with wide-angle lenses to cover the panels across the breadth of the aperture.

‘The good thing about this design’, muses Laing, ‘is that it’s pushed me in a different direction. But I also think it’s pushed Marianne and the Builders in a
different direction because they’ve never really had anything as sort of structured as this or indeed as big or technically, mechanically involved.’ Laing observes that normally his work is not as defined by mediated images. ‘What I’ve designed is a receptacle, and usually I’m doing more than that, I’m usually designing something that is giving the audience as much information as I want to give them. This time I’m designing the blank page and somebody else – well, a whole team of people – are filling in all the other information.’ We turn to those people next.

Digital design and visual content

One challenge the company addressed was how visually to represent the phenomenon of data without simply reproducing data. Early on at the Kitchen Laing notes to Flaherty that he likes the aesthetic of the grid, provided by a graph paper effect that Flaherty has created. The grid becomes (matrix-like) both a nexus of nodes and, when broken down to its simplest shape, a collection of separate squares that can then become cubes – an abstract representation of bits of interconnecting information. The grid helps cohere the entire video design, which in any case requires a meeting of different minds and processes.

Flaherty observes that he prefers not to work with ‘found’ footage but rather find ‘an aesthetic from a design process’. Meanwhile, as he suggests, the dbox designers ‘are exceptional at rendering a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. ... The ideal scenario – and we’ll see if this actually works out – is that they’re building these virtual 3D spaces and I’m building two-
dimensional video-based data spaces, and trying to determine how I can integrate live camera, real-time effects and make that work on stage.'

Weems and the visual design team gather at dbox’s offices in Leroy Street, Manhattan, and watch some imagery that Gibbs and his colleagues have modelled. It shows interiors of the Fletchers’ home, zooming into and panning around their chic and capacious dwelling. Gibbs is concerned that if the interiors are animated in this way in the eventual staging, the image loses its realist perspective in relation to the performers onstage. Weems, on the other hand, does not find such inconsistencies a concern. Theatre audiences, indeed, read spatial relationships with a form of poetic licence.

Gibbs moves items of virtual furniture into the lounge next to the kitchen, giving the virtual spaces greater proportionality. Weems asks for a rotation around the whole house – an estate agent’s 360-degree view. ‘Yeah, it’s a beautiful image’, she says, ‘but I don’t think that works in the theatre. The actors are in the wrong relation.’ The process here entails a continual flow of ideas, changes of nuance that get tested quickly by way of small reconfigurations, slow nibblings at concepts and possibilities. It feels unpressured.

‘What I’m after’, says Weems, ‘is some kind of motion. Whether it’s something that comes out onto the front screen… It goes dead after it’s been still for a while.’ Gibbs shows two images of horizontal tree-like shapes that grow and develop branches. One looks very spiky and organic, the other like an accumulating cluster of wires. Weems asks to see this next to a body onstage. This motif will eventually become the basis for the branches of data that stream
behind the businessman as he crosses borders, gathering transactions, reports and surveillance records in boxes and cubes as he goes.

At a pavement café nearby in Manhattan’s revived Meatpacking District the team discusses the use of the rear cyclorama. ‘Yesterday was the worst it has looked,’ says Flaherty abruptly. ‘There was no space. You don’t get a sense of perspectival depth.’

I muse to myself that, if true, this reflects somewhat dismally on dbox’s involvement, since providing graphical perspective is one of its signal endeavours. But Gibbs appears unfazed. He suggests projecting some elements onto the front scrim to create more depth. ‘I’m not married to the panorama’ (the wide stretch of the rear projection), he says. ‘But it seems like we have to minimise options, because we have so many.’ Weems intervenes to say that the panorama should be the template for all the design on the rear screen – a useful directorial mandate.

They discuss the real-time motion capture effects that they have been pursuing, where a camera is trained on a performer and the feed run through software that enables the projection of different outlines and shapes of the performer’s body. Weems is a little sceptical, but still in search of a real-time relation between performer and screen. ‘Allen Hahn [the lighting designer] said it best,’ she observes. ‘Yesterday it looked like an A-ha video. I don’t want to keep saying the same thing about interactivity. I do not want the entire show to be people moving around in pre-recorded imagery.’ What’s afoot, then, is an attempt to use both pre-recorded video and live camerawork. Weems is right. There is a
different texture and feel when both performance and video projection exploit synchronous real-time mediation – a palpable liveness and immediacy to the fusion of elements.

‘I don’t want to get locked into making everything human scale,’ Weems continues. ‘The overwhelming feeling in this piece is that technology is bigger than the human – that’s what we have to hold on to.’

The following day in the rehearsal room they explore the principle of pulling images from the rear screen onto a front panel, along with a zoom into the Fletchers’ virtual kitchen. As perspectives shift, a chair in the image cross-fades to appear on a panel downstage in larger proportion. An intern stands in as Carol Fletcher, and walks on the spot, her back to the audience as if going upstage into the kitchen. The effect is striking but slightly unreal, as Gibbs observes, since the intern’s body-size doesn’t change in sync with the changing scale of the room. ‘Yes, that’s the point,’ says Weems. A theatrical moment looms – one that suggests a naturalistic space, effects a transformation of it and in doing so reminds the spectator that this is a fabricated theatre configuration. Weems asks Gibbs to prepare three more such effects for Saturday’s showcase.

By the St Ann’s phase six months later, this effect has been finessed. For Carol’s final scene, the backdrop shows a living room complete with grand piano in front of large windows. The image morphs to become a grid of white lines on black, then zooms into close-up as a smaller blue grid slides on from the sides. Meanwhile the downstage panels move into play along the front of the playing area. The sequence performs a series of small transitions in screen space and
stage space that give the piece a dynamic feel and powerfully rhythmic flow. A slight strobing of the lines within the image makes this house – this life – seem unstable, volatile, more virtual than actual.

You can see how slow cooking eventually produces its dish. It is a process of infusion, trying out ideas that lead to other ideas, one solution permeating another, all with the purpose of establishing – or discovering – core principles and closing in on the final outcome.

The audio in ‘audio-visual’

The importance of Dan Dobson’s sound to the Builders Association’s multimedia identity can hardly be overstated. It is to some extent cinematic – ever-present, providing tone and rhythm, pace and punctuation. Yet it is more ‘architectural’ than many film scores, part of the structure of the piece rather than merely an accompaniment to it. When rehearsing one of the businessman scenes, for instance, Dobson provides an accompaniment: a pulsing riff, slightly ragged and jazzy, with a muffled underbeat and, at regular intervals, an electronic ‘meow’. The composition is ambient, understated yet threatening, and crucial to the shaping of the scene.

‘I always think of the sound as just an instrumental bed’, says Dobson, ‘and the text is really the lyrics of these songs. It’s musical, the whole process. … the stuff I do is very cyclical and loopy because it can provide some sense of – I
don’t want to say “motion” – but feel. I always find that strong melodies just sort of take over and speak too much. We tend to like the ambient stuff.’ He develops computer-generated electronic music for Super Vision – ‘a blibbity blibbity thing’ – that sits well with the technological feel of the production, along with separate motifs for the show’s three narratives. ‘We make so much stuff, and we throw so much of it away’, he says, ‘but you need to have that kind of repertoire to pull from.’ Importantly, sound is developed alongside other production elements. In rehearsal Dobson sketches as he goes and tries things out, and Weems prefers to run scenes with sound wherever possible. Again the principle is one of continual iteration. It means that Dobson provides an acoustic infrastructure that from the outset is ingrained in the DNA of the piece.

Reckonings

The show is run on Thursday 22 September 2005 towards the end of the fortnight at St Ann’s. This is an early run-through and will be a little bumpy. At this point of the process the piece’s inherent difficulties – perhaps weaknesses – show up in starker relief, before the machinery of production has smoothed them out. When the performers speak, given their amplified voices and the ironies of the piece, they all sound like Laurie Anderson. The quest regarding the deeds of the grandmother’s house is not properly resolved, and questions remain concerning Jen’s motivation and indeed her relationship with her grandmother. The traveller scenes nicely depict the sinister reach of the authorities but are a little lurid. The storyline of the Fletchers gives unlikeable characters actions that
have little development in texture. Indeed none of the characters seem
developed in much depth, a function of the scene structure, I think, rather than
the performances. Each narrative is somewhat mono-dimensional as a
consequence of providing a vehicle for multimedia design and theme.

Yet what design. At the Kitchen, Flaherty voiced a principal challenge: 'How
do you fill out a 6-foot shallow space so that it feels like a full perspective?' Part
of the achievement of this work is that it produces dimensionality in a virtuoso
mix of planes and perspectives. The extremely thin performance strip,
sandwiched by flat projection screens, is sumptuously fleshed out front and
behind, with depth and dynamic provided by the video compositions and moving
panels. 'Yeah,' agrees Laing. 'I think that it gives everything a real stillness, in the
performance. Because the surround is so busy and moving and the images are
moving on the screens and the screens are moving. It gives the performers an
opportunity to just be really still.'

That's true, but the show's pleasures are also to do with movement of a
different sort. It is like a machine, with an ineffable fluency to the conjunction of
sound, utterance, action and imagery. Moment by moment it creates powerful
vignettes that playfully develop resonant themes. Its spatial and visual
compositions appear beautifully balanced, then shift to be replaced by different
configurations. The modulations of tone are carefully calibrated, whilst a
prevailing irony confers beguiling coolness. The show has panache, and there is
an exciting grandeur to the contemporaneity of its form and subject matter.
Reviewers typically responded positively to Super Vision’s technical sophistication. Mark Swed, writing in the Los Angeles Times, described it as a ‘dazzling high-tech extravaganza’ and attributed to Weems’ work a certain delicacy in that intersection of glee and creepiness. The glee is in the technology, which she uses better than just about anyone. … The video wizardry … calls attention to itself, because its use is so slick and efficient and brightly innovative … But Weems is most remarkable in creating her own personal interface between technology and traditional theatre. The video serves live theatre, not the other way around.

Michael Grossberg, in the Columbus Dispatch, found that ‘More for its innovative techniques than its subject, Super Vision ranks as one of the most fascinating and rewarding multimedia theatre works in years.’ In a eulogistic review in the Wall Street Journal, Terry Teachout describes the show as ‘a computer-enhanced visual poem about the pitfalls and promises of life in the information age … in which six actors move through a breathtakingly complex series of digitally generated three-dimensional projections.’

Reviewers also responded to the show’s overt engagement with themes of surveillance, data exploitation and the erosions of personal space, although here opinion was divided. For Joyce McMillan, writing in the Scotsman, the show tackles its themes ‘with real emotion, and a powerful elegiac sense of that richly
rooted, sensual and affectionate dimension of life that somehow fails to transfer to the digital sphere.’¹²

By contrast, Neil Genzlinger suggested in the New York Times that ‘for something so technically sophisticated, the piece is all too simplistic and familiar in its central idea: Data accumulation=bad. … [T]he data revolution is well under way by now, and most people are making peace with it day by day, taking advantage of its good points and viewing its negative ones realistically.’¹³

One difficulty in delivering the theme of dataveillance is that the three narratives didn’t quite centre in relation to it, perhaps because the company was in thrall to the techne of the phenomenon they sought to expose. The businessman is subject to a form of border-checking whose dystopian futurism gives this strand a fantastical slant. John Sr. is concerned not so much with dataveillance as data-trafficking, and he is brought down by those old enemies, greed and debt, rather than electronic policing. And the exchanges between Jen and her grandmother really concern a family history (and a set of title deeds) rather than anything more insidious or (‘veillance’-like) subject to external inspection. Thematically, then, for all its apparent concentration Super Vision is a little loose, arguably as a result of a process that settled relatively early on the narratives themselves, and prioritised the problem-solving of design challenges over the ongoing development of material through performance.
There is another lens through which to see this production, however, whose filter is provided by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his book *Postdramatic Theatre*. In many respects *Super Vision* accords with Lehmann’s description of the postdramatic: it is multi-perspectival, depends at least as much upon its visual and visceral characteristics as its storylines and generates effect through its flow and sensory organisation. When Lehmann suggests that ‘Postdramatic theatre is a theatre of states and of scenically dynamic formations’, he could be describing *Super Vision*.14

In another respect, however, *Super Vision* points beyond Lehmann’s conception of the postdramatic. ‘The theatre of sense and synthesis has largely disappeared – and with it the possibility of synthesizing interpretation,’ Lehmann argues. ‘Synthesis is cancelled. It is explicitly combated. … Enclosed within postdramatic theatre is obviously the demand for an open and fragmenting perception in place of a unifying and closed perception.’15

*Super Vision* suggests an alternative perspective, a third way that combines both synthesis and fragmentation. This is a theatre for the age after postmodernism, post the postdramatic. Its paradigms are coordination, synchronicity, systematicity. Synthesis is very definitely not cancelled but a key feature. *Super Vision*’s creative process is intended to facilitate coherence (thematic, formal, narratival, operational). That said, the piece and its process retain difference as a key determinant – its separate elements are discrete and internally coherent. There is, then, a larger paradigm at work: a deeply scored functional interdependency. Different storylines, media and thematic tropes –
along with a range of collaborators – are brought together such that their
togetherness and, simultaneously, their distinctness give meaning and affect.
Super Vision is an outcome of twenty-first-century collaborative digital-theatre
production. It depends upon everything being separate and everything coming
together, in a powerful rendition of live performance that is always and also
mediated as something more quintessentially itself.

Box 1.1: On time

Super Vision's process of collective creation means that time-consuming
changes must be made on the march. At one point during rehearsals at St Ann’s
video designer Peter Flaherty asks to change the timing of a video transition.
‘Just a second,’ he calls.

‘Someone’s gonna start a lexicon of Builders’ terms,’ says Marianne
Weems dryly. “One second” means at least two minutes.’ She might be talking
for anyone working with video in theatre.

“How much longer?” means “Fuck you”,’ says sound designer Dan Dobson.
They laugh. Time is always of the essence. In most ball games, the ball is in play
for much less than game time. So in devising. We forget this at our peril.

Box 1.2: On laptops
The Builders Association rehearsal room bristles with laptops. Everybody, it seems, has one. The laptop of choice is a Mac, so an array of brushed aluminium PowerBooks quietly whirrs away. This could be a set for an advertisement.

The laptops are like a flourish across the room. During the workshop at St Ann’s, Marianne Weems asks Rizwan Mirza to use his laptop at the forestage desk at which the operators sit along with the performers when the latter are not onstage. The video operators necessarily have their laptops, which are functional. Positioning one at the actors’ seats is a bit of set dressing – designed to enhance the sense that everyone in this production is online, connected, hands-on with technology.

**Box 1.3: On technical operation**

*Super Vision* would be nothing without its operators. Not in the obvious sense that someone needs to press Go for sound, lighting, video and (here) sliding panels, but in a much more ingrained way through the process as a whole. Jeff Morey, who assists video designer Peter Flaherty and operates the show’s video projections along with a colleague, undertakes continual problem-solving in the rehearsal room. He determines how some of the transitions play out in discussion with sound designer Dan Dobson. Unusually, Dobson operates his own sound design on tour, meaning that the relation between sound and performance is continually finessed, to the point where extremely subtle
interactions and deft timings are possible. Design is only half the work. Grafting it into the fabric of production is the other half.

During the final phase of rehearsal at St Ann’s Warehouse a minor difficulty arises in transitioning out of one of the businessman scenes. The company tries to find a line in the dialogue that will be a video cue point. The trouble is that the actors don’t stick to the same script. It is agreed that video will take its cue on a count of three from an earlier line that is fixed. What’s interesting here is that rather than ask the actors to set what they do, their improvisation is taken as inherent to the performance, and the technical team works with and around it. Elsewhere in the show, cue points are rigorously marked. Nonetheless, this instance intimates the shift from a text-based production process to one that is more organic, interactive and, you might say, operational.

**Box 1.4: Three memories**

1. *The parking lot*

Shortly before I get to the Kitchen on my first day of observation I pass a small parking lot. There are two layers of cars – clearly one layer parks, then is hydraulically lifted. I have never seen this arrangement before. What if you want to collect your car that’s in mid-air before the drivers of the cars underneath have returned? I guess the parking lot attendant has to do some shimmying of cars and lifts. This set-up seems apt to a city that stacks up on top of itself, and evokes a theatre process that requires continual shifting of component parts. And
it is a reminder in this digital age of the continued presence of mechanical technologies.

2. The company photograph

Everybody gathers *en masse* in front of a picturesquely distressed brick façade outside the studio at St Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn – actors, designers, technicians, interns. As the newest guy on the block – and an observer, not a participant – I take the photo. A company photo can be many things: celebratory, sentimental, inclusive, creating the appearance of harmony, recording the fact of togetherness, marking the peculiar conjunction of bodies and energies that is a theatre project at a particular moment. Twenty-six people are gathered. I am given other cameras with which to record this collective moment.

3. Looking at new things

People are continually showing new things to others – websites, fabrics, images of favoured discoveries. A scene is rehearsed that involves a blast of light onto a white surface. The reflected light illuminates the creative team and assorted interns scattered around the auditorium. They are watching intently. If there were a motif for this production process, it would be absorption in the face of new things.
Notes


2 All quotations from members of The Builders Association are from interviews with the author and observations of workshop development between 28 March-2 April 2005 and 21-23 September 2005, unless otherwise stated. I am most grateful to the company, and Marianne Weems in particular, for allowing me to observe and being unfailingly helpful and considerate.


5 dbox’s website is at www.dbox.com (accessed 23 March 2008).


8 Images are all from the development and rehearsal process. For some good production shots see http://www.superv.org/ and follow the link to images.


