« A country called Dissocia » : Anthony Neilson's Heterotopian Exploration of Madness

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Résumé. *Le Monde Merveilleux de Dissocia* (2004) du dramaturge écossais Anthony Neilson illustre parfaitement la déclaration de Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari selon laquelle « écrire n'a rien à voir avec signifier, mais avec arpenter, cartographier, même des contrées à venir ». Chronique d'un basculement dans la folie, la pièce nous transporte avec son héroïne dans un univers souterrain imaginaire, explorant et exploitant ainsi les liens entre théâtralité et spatialité. Neilson combine et contraste l'espace extravagant du premier acte avec l'espace extrêmement austère d'un hôpital psychiatrique dans le second, passant alors de la dystopie à l' « hétérotopie » (Michel Foucault). Cet article se propose d'étudier les stratégies hétérotopiques mises en place par Neilson dans son approche novatrice de la folie comme de la dramaturgie même. Représenter la folie est un défi au théâtre ; la scène doit donc se faire espace de re-présentation et d'innovation.

Mots-clés : Folie, Hétérotopie, Tthéâtralité, Spatialité, Théâtre postdramatique

Abstract. Anthony Neilson's *Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) is a striking illustration of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's contention that « writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come ». The play literalizes its heroine's descent into madness by transporting her as well as the audience to an imaginary underground country, thus exploring and exploiting the links between theatricality and spatiality. Neilson combines, and starkly contrasts an exuberant space explored in Act One with the extremely austere space of a mental hospital in Act Two, moving from dystopia to « heterotopia » (Michel Foucault). This paper aims to study Neilson's heterotopian strategies in his innovative approach to insanity as well as to theatre-making. Staging madness challenges the representational potential of theatre itself, and demands that the page and the stage be turned into a space for re-presentation and innovation.

Keywords: Madness, Heterotopia, Theatricality, Spatiality, Postdramatic Theatre

Throughout his career, Anthony Neilson has been said to « go anywhere and do anything » he wants: critics refer to him as one of the most innovative and provocative Scottish theatre artists of his generation (Reid in Sierz, 2012: 137), « one of British theatre's hardcore extremists », « a serial offender », even « a natural-born maverick » (Cavendish, 2004). As a writer whose single commandment to his peers is « THOU SHALT NOT BORE » (Neilson, 2007), he keeps experimenting and consistently honours his commitment to entertainment and innovation, as exemplified by his 2004 play *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*. Although he was always « particularly interested in madness » (Galbraith in Sierz, 2012: 141), *Dissocia*, with its unprecedented focus on « people's internal workings, the inside of their heads », is the first of his texts to « tackl[e] madness head-on » (McClure, 2004: 690). According to Trish Reid, the new millennium and a play such as *Dissocia* mark a turning point in Neilson's career with the « rejection of the conventions of realist narrative in favour of a formally innovative engagement with the problem of representing subjective reality in the theatre » (Sierz, 2012: 141). The central experiment in the play is the creation of the eponymous « country called Dissocia » (Neilson, 2008 : 205-206), theatricalizing the internal workings of Lisa Jones, « a woman in her thirties » who, very much like a string on the guitar she's initially tuning, « snaps » (*Ibid.* : 199). Having purportedly lost an hour during an international journey, Lisa has also lost the balance in her life; to recover this lost hour, she is sent on a "curiouser and curiouser" quest, much like Alice's in Wonderland, through the colourful and absurdist world of Dissocia. As pointed out by Trish Reid

> Dissocia is a country both terrible and funny, and it exists entirely in Lisa's head, as the audience discovers in the starkly contrasting second act which takes place inside a muffled white room where Lisa is being treated by the staff of a psychiatric unit for a dissociative disorder. (Reid, 2007: 488-489)

The play therefore literalizes its heroine's descent into madness by transporting her as well as the audience to an imaginary underground (wonder) land, emphasizing and capitalizing on the inherent relationship between theatricality and spatiality. In its devising of highly imaginative and potentially subversive spaces, *Dissocia* should be seen as a striking illustration of Deleuze and Guattari's contention that « writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come »[1]. Neilson contrasts and combines the extravagant, both utopian and dystopian « realm » of Dissocia in Act One with the starkly austere space of a mental hospital in Act Two, one of the « heterotopias » defined by Foucault as sites both inside and

1 « Écrire n'a rien à voir avec signifier, mais avec arpenter, cartographier, même des contrées à venir » (Deleuze, Guattari, 1980 : 11). My translation.

outside society, offering a simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space we live in[2].

This article argues that through his exploration of madness, Neilson turns the imaginary world of Dissocia and the play as a whole into a heterotopia, that is, a space for both critique and creation, allowing for other experiences and new modes of representation to emerge. The study will first dwell on the interplay between individual and collective insanity within the alternative space of Dissocia (which functions in turn as utopia, dystopia and heterotopia), before attempting to show that through its heterotopian exploration of madness, the play itself becomes a space for alternatives, calling for theatrical renovation and/or innovation.

Individual and collective insanity in the world of Dissocia

> **Automated Voice** Thank you for calling the Dissocian Embassy. If you wish to report a conspiracy, please press 1. If you think everyone would be better off without you, please press 2. If you wish to correct a temporal disturbance, please press 3. If you wish to press 4, please press 5 (Neilson, 2008: 206).

The automated message Lisa hears when she first contacts Dissocia offers many clues as to the nature and functions of this so-called « wonderful world ». First of all, it is a place of madness: the name itself explicitly hints at a dissociative disorder[3], thus echoing R.D. Laing's now proverbial description of « the divided self » of madness (Laing, 1990). In addition, options 1 and 2 are addressed to individuals with paranoid and suicidal tendencies or syndromes. However, Dissocia is the product of Lisa's individual mind: option 3 is truly specific to her case. Finally, it is a space of absurdist logic (« if you wish to press 4, please press 5 »), a land of comedy often playing on parody and satire.

Although a theatrical rendering of the inside of Lisa's head, an imaginary underworld of individual madness, Dissocia is also a reversed image of the world above (a world gone mad), a critique of collective insanity. Therefore this world in reverse, albeit a figment of a very rich imagination, simultaneously offers a heterotopian perspective on the real world.

A journey to the underworld

Much like one of its main inspirations, Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, « The Wonderful World of Dissocia » is an underground country, as the welcoming

2 « [C]es espaces différents, ces autres lieux, une espèce de contestation à la fois mythique et réelle de l'espace où nous vivons » (Foucault, 2004 : 15).

3 Furthermore, the country will be referred to later on as « the Divided States of Dissocia » (Neilson, 2008 : 220), a description which could also indicate that this « wonderful new world » parodies, to some extent, the United States of America.

song by its inhabitants makes clear : « No one *in the world above* will/ Love you like the people of/ This wonderful new world » (Neilson, 2008 : 222. My emphasis). The recurring use of the adjective « wonderful » is more than a linguistic echo to Wonderland; it lends this new world utopian features.

To reach Dissocia, Lisa must thus descend in an elevator (previously her flat). This journey to the underworld first of all literalizes the common phrase « descent into madness », and suggests an exploration of Lisa's subconscious, an opportunity for the playwright and his audience to probe the depths of a mind giving in to madness. The idea of going to the depths, seeing under the surface, is confirmed by Neilson's choice of terms in his « Notes » to Act One, when he mentions that by the end of the first part, « Lisa is totally *immerged* » (*Ibid.* : 197). Neilson insists that this process of immersion should be gradual for both Lisa and the audience: Act One is meant to « ease us into the world of Dissocia » (*Ibid.*: 197). What Neilson calls « subtly odd elements » are already present before Lisa reaches Dissocia: she is visited by a Swiss watchmaker who, we are told, « bears more than a passing resemblance to how we imagine Sigmund Freud » (*Ibid.*: 199) and is used to drinking one glass of urine a day. However, the space first reached by Lisa after the elevator ride is said to resemble « some kind of airport arrivals lounge » (*Ibid.* : 208), that is, a place of transition[4] ; defamiliarisation escalates as we move further into Dissocia, reaching for instance « a musical field » – no longer merely a phrase but a full-fledged space where to each movement corresponds a specific sound.

In spite of a flurry of spatial descriptions throughout Act One, and the fact that Dissocia exhibits rich and varying landscapes, Neilson indicates in his « Notes » that « in Act One there is no scenery as such ». « Instead, the playing area is covered with domestic carpeting » (Neilson, 2008 : 196) ; domestic carpeting conjures up images of the home and, as Gaston Bachelard underlines in his *Poetics of Space*, the space of home gives us insight into the human mind. What he calls « topo-analysis » is precisely the use of domestic imagery to study the inner depths of our intimate selves[5]. Neilson does mention that this design concept is recommended to suggest that Act One is occurring in Lisa's « interior » (Neilson, 2008: 196). Dissocia is Lisa's refuge, which explains its many utopian or fantasy elements such as the musical field, various joyful songs or the friendship of a singing polar bear.

However this inner space, this mindscape of madness also comprises several dystopian aspects, underlining the darker dimensions usually associated to an underworld. Lisa's journey through the looking-glass is therefore not

4 In his well-known *Introduction to Supermodernity* (2009), Marc Augé includes airports in his list of « non-places », spaces characterised by mobility rather than fixity. In the wake of the « spatial turn » and Augé's work, the emerging field of border studies is currently reconceptualising the airport as a « borderscape » (Bocchi, Brambilla, Laine & Scott, 2015 : 20) – a liminal and therefore transitional space.

5 « Psychologie descriptive, psychologie des profondeurs, psychanalyse et phénoménologie pourraient, avec la maison, constituer ce corps de doctrines que nous désignons sous le nom de topo-analyse […] et prendre la maison comme un instrument d'analyse pour l'âme humaine » (Bachelard, 1967 : 18-19).

just liberating or exhilarating, but also threatening, as Dissocia is not merely a reflection of her own madness, but the distorted image of a mad world.

A world gone mad

Just as madness is considered in the wake of Descartes and Foucault to be the dark side or the underside of reason, Dissocia is the dark underside of « the world above », a distorting mirror sending back a dystopian reflection. It is a world living under the menacing shadow of the Black Dog King – an extremely evocative title since « the black dog » is a recurring metaphor for depression, as highlighted by Roy Porter in his « brief history » of madness (Porter, 2002: 86). The exiled Queen of Dissocia, who turns out to be Lisa herself, does indeed appear to be running from a type of mental illness involving bouts of depression – exemplified in Act Two by Lisa's almost uninterrupted silence and utter dejection. As the austerity and blankness of the second act may epitomize and theatricalize a state of depression, the exuberance and overabundance of Act One transcribe the feverish throes of a manic episode. However, the Black Dog King also stands for a wider destructive force inherent in our society ; Dissocia as dystopia is one more realization of what Femi Obeyode, in his study of madness and theatre, identifies as « the idea that the mad individual is only symptomatic of a mad world, a visible reaction to that world » (Obeyode, 2012 : vii).

The title of the play may be taken literally in some instances, yet very ironically in many others: nothing seems less « wonderful » than a world where, as one of the Guards at the airport informs Lisa, « [t]here's always a war on » (Neilson, 2008: 211). This is a significant echo to Sarah Kane's *Blasted,* where the character of Cate makes the following comment: « [l]ooks like there's a war on » (Kane, 2001: 33). This hesitant remark is fully and definitively reasserted in *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*. The world is always on the brink of extreme violence, as both Kane and Neilson remind their audience, whether in a grim and apocalyptic or comical and absurdist mode. Neilson himself, often hailed a member – even a precursor – of in-yer-face theatre, has drawn parallels between his work and Kane's while underlining some of their differences:

> I only feel like I'm writing something good if it's uncomfortable for me. The crux of the matter is : do we want to create things that are memorable ? I disagreed with the way Sarah *Kane* wrote, but we both felt a frustration that theatre was giving people a cerebral experience, rather than a visceral or emotional one (Cavendish).

Such plays, however « uncomfortable », are meant to engage and disturb the audience, and one « memorable » passage in *Dissocia*, still echoing *Blasted* in its choice of motif, is that of the bombing of the West territories. In a striking escalation of violence (also reminiscent of the plot of Kane's first play), Lisa is flying over Dissocia with Jane, a council worker who has just been raped in her place, and now sets about dropping bombs on lands occupied by the Black Dog King's

army. Although initially horrified, Lisa, once informed that these are « novelty bomb[s] » which « leav[e] a scorch mark in the shape of a cat » (Neilson, 2008 : 247-248), urges Jane on and delights in watching the bombs drop :

> **Lisa** No, it's horrible – all the houses are burning, look – those are children down there !
> **Jane** Yes, but look at that !
> **Lisa** Oooh, you're right – it's a cat !
> **Jane** Quite good, isn't it ?!
> **Lisa** Have you got any other ones ? !
> **Jane** I've got one shaped like a rhino ?
> **Lisa** Oh, drop that one ! (Neilson, 2008 : 248)

The play's darkest comedy is an oblique dystopian indictment of some potential excesses of the world above, and the collective insanity which certain advances and behaviours might lead to ; since in its critical function it is not merely an underworld but sometimes a world in reverse, Dissocia may not only be a dystopian, but also a heterotopian space.

From dystopia to heterotopia

Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as

> real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted[6].

He contrasts heterotopias with utopias, described as « sites with no real place […] that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces »[7]. Dissocia, as a « fundamentally unreal space », does not seem to qualify as a heterotopia, as opposed to the mental hospital depicted in Act Two whose style, as Neilson indicates in his « Notes », « should be as naturalistic as possible » (Neilson, 2008: 270). Psychiatric hospitals are paragons of what Foucault analyzes as heterotopias of deviation, where individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required norm are placed. However, the majority of

6 « [D]es lieux réels, des lieux effectifs, des lieux qui sont dessinés dans l'institution même de la société, et qui sont des sortes de contre-emplacements, sortes d'utopies effectivement réalisées dans lesquelles tous les autres emplacements réels que l'on peut trouver à l'intérieur de la culture sont à la fois représentés, contestés et inversés » (Foucault, 2004 : 15). My translation.

7 « Les utopies, ce sont les emplacements sans lieu réel. Ce sont les emplacements qui entretiennent avec l'espace réel de la société un rapport général d'analogie directe ou inversée. C'est la société elle-même perfectionnée ou c'est l'envers de la société, mais de toute façon, ces utopies sont des espaces qui sont fondamentalement essentiellement irréels » (*Ibid.* : 14-15).

Neilson's strategies for « representing, contesting, and inverting » society's real sites seem to be deployed in Act One, making Dissocia a heterotopian (albeit imaginary) space.

For instance, the initial depiction of the mock airport arrivals lounge and the events unfolding there undoubtedly represent, invert and contest encounters and procedures of « real [airport] sites ». What the audience witnesses is a parody of airport customs procedures, playing on both mimicry and inversion. The guards conducting Lisa's interview embody such dynamics of reversal:

> **Guard 2** We can't trust anyone. Not even a stranger like you. […] Such is the lot… of an insecurity guard.
> *Pause.*
> **Lisa** An *in*security guard?
> **Guard 2** Yes?
> **Lisa** Do you mean a security guard?
> *The* **Guards** *look at each other.*
> **Guard 2** What would be the point in that?
> **Guard 1** No, I mean, if it's secure –
> **Guard 2** – why would you have to guard it? ! (Neilson, 2008: 212)

These insecurity guards follow a recognizable script in their questions to Lisa, but they associate standard or conventional phrasings with highly unconventional topics: « Has anybody other than yourself worn this dress today? » (*Ibid.*: 215). Such substitutions comically hint at the absurdities – the insanities – of certain administrative and security procedures. The list of forbidden items to carry is equally puzzling, including pants with clouds or rabbits on them, and feathers:

> **Guard 1** Ah well, you see, a feather can be used to tickle a pilot's arse with –
> **Guard 2** Causing him to crash!
> **Lisa** I'm not getting on a plane.
> **Guard 1** But that's exactly what a pilot-tickler would say, isn't it?
> **Guard 2** Can't take any chances. (*Ibid.*: 213)

Once again, parody turns into blatant satire as references to the war on terror and the underlying paranoia are clear. By both representing and inverting gestures, expressions and procedures of « real sites » in the world of Dissocia, Neilson designs a quintessentially heterotopian space, producing what Foucault himself calls « a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live ». I would argue that if Foucault's rich concept of heterotopia is to be extended and applied to literature and theatre (the essence of which is indeed to create « other spaces »), the very definition of heterotopias should on occasion be broadened to include specific imaginary spaces, such as the « wonderful world » designed by Neilson.

Dissocia, as a heterotopia, not only offers the audience unique insight into the experience of madness and reveals the underlying insanity of the real world; it also encourages a reconsideration of individual and collective experience, and calls for renovation on the specific space of the stage. Indeed, Neilson's Dissocian « experiment » foregrounds the theatre itself as a heterotopia, and turns the play into a space where critique breeds (re)creation.

The heterotopian stage

Barnaby Power, who played the watch-mender Victor Hesse in the 2007 production of *Dissocia* by the National Theatre of Scotland, stresses that the play is « as much to do with theatre as it is to do with mental illness » (Reid, 2007 : 498). It seems that Neilson's exploration of madness encourages him to develop new ways of writing and staging[8], and make the stage itself a heterotopia not merely of deviation, but of creation also. After all, Foucault's description of these « real places […] that are formed in the very founding of society », these « counter-sites […] in which the real sites […] are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted » perfectly applies to the theatre. Is theatre not « a kind of effectively enacted utopia », a heterotopia *par excellence?*

As Trish Reid puts forward, « Neilson is more interested in show-making than playwriting and it is perhaps not surprising that both he and his actors choose metaphors drawn from the visual and spatial arts to describe his process » (McClure, 2007: 498). As a playwright and director, or perhaps a director and playwright, Neilson capitalizes on the spatiality of theatre, making Dissocia a space for alternatives both on page and on stage.

Superimposing spaces

One function of heterotopias which is central to theatre-making in general, and *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* in particular, is the superimposition of different spaces, as Foucault explains, significantly choosing the theatre as his first example : « The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theatre brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another »[9]. The play's starkly binary structure foregrounds the « incompatibility » between the world of Dissocia and

8 According to Brian McClure, Neilson's choice of staging madness not from the medical perspective, but « through the eyes of a bewildered (manically psychotic) patient », « reaps intriguing, dramatic rewards » and « allows Neilson the freedom to explore his originality » (McClure, 2004 : 690).

9 We are quoting from Jay Miskowiec's translation (available on line, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>) of the article by Michel Foucault entitled « Des espaces autres » [« Of Other Spaces »] (1967) : « l'hétérotopie a le pouvoir de juxtaposer en un seul lieu réel plusieurs espaces, plusieurs emplacements qui sont en eux-mêmes incompatibles. C'est ainsi que le théâtre fait succéder sur le rectangle de la scène toute une série de lieux qui sont étrangers les uns aux autres […] » (Foucault, 2004 : 17).

that of a mental hospital. As immediately specified in Neilson's « Notes » to the second act, « [t]he whole point of Act Two is that it is the polar opposite of Act One » (Neilson, 2008: 270) and the set will enhance the disparity: « [t] here should be no overt colour used in set design, costume or lighting » (*Ibid.*) whereas « the emphasis in the first act is on colour, imagination and variety in all departments » (*Ibid.*: 197) .Whereas the acting was « stylised » in Act One, it will be « as naturalistic as possible » (*Ibid.* : 270) in Act Two ; this return to more conventional ways of staging and acting is inscribed in the text by the return to a division into scenes in Act Two, as opposed to Act One where « the play [moves] in the same way the mind does, through association » (Neilson in Cavendish, 2004). The mad world of Dissocia indeed moves through association, « renounc[ing] formal logic or conventional readability » (Reid, 2007: 496) and freely superimposing different spaces, either literal (the airport lounge, the musical field, the hot-dog stand) or intertextual: as important hypotexts, Oz and Wonderland are two of many layers in the Dissocian palimpsest[10], a crossing between various spaces as well as genres.

Critics have frequently dwelled on the radical discrepancy between the two heterotopias presented in the play: while Michael Billington mentions « two starkly polarised sections » (Billington, 2007), Trish Reid contends that « the play's overall effect is substantially dependent on a collision between two extreme types of signifying practice » (Reid, 2007: 490), « a kind of dialectic of semiotic surplus and famine » (*Ibid.*: 496). Although Dissocia and the real world are undeniably in opposition, they are also in ap-position, superimposed, as made obvious by Neilson's directions as regards sound design for the play:

> The sound designer has two tasks in Act One : firstly, to help create the 'scenery' of Dissocia itself ; secondly, to hint at what is actually happening in the real world. […] A basic example is the « elevator » scene – while Lisa perceives herself to be in a lift, the sound (and the actors' movements) suggest that she is actually in an underground train. (Neilson, 2008 : 197)

It is also mentioned that the other elevator passengers « look like fairly regular commuters » (*Ibid.*: 206). The soundscape of the real world seeps into the background of Dissocia, just as Dissocia comes back to haunt the real world in the last scene of Act Two with the return of lights, music and the figure of the polar bear:

10 As Michael Billington underlines, « Dissocia turns out to be a carnival-esque amalgam of Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl, NF Simpson and the Goons" (Billington, 2007). Trish Reid notes that « the reviewers spent a lot of time cross-referencing the characters and events of Dissocia with other widely known popular texts, especially the film versions of: *Alice in Wonderland* (1966) ; *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968); *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) ; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) and even *Star Wars* (1977) ». As she further states, however, « this is partly to miss the point, which is that the overabundance and accumulation of signs are the dominant stylistic feature in Dissocia's first act » (Reid, 2007 : 496).

> *Night.* **Lisa** *is asleep. She looks at peace. In her arms she holds a small polar bear.*
> *We hear music at last.*
> *Coloured lights play on her face, swirling around her head.*
> *Dissocia still exists, caged within her head.*
> *There is little doubt that she will return to her kingdom.* (Neilson, 2008: 285)

At the close of the play, the audience is once again immersed in Lisa's dream, looking beyond representations of the external world to see « within her head ». Neilson designed the play so as to make us look at mental illness in a more subjective way than we are used to, which required producing something in free form through a specific, alternative technique of « show-making » and « play-writing » – a truly heterotopian practice.

From stage to page: alternative theatre-making

As early as 1995, Neilson identified a significant evolution in his theatre-making practice, leading to more interaction and improvisation:

> I can no longer draw a distinction between the writing and the direction of a piece, and I am trying to explore the areas where the text ends and the lighting and the sound begins […]. I've always liked the ephemerality of the theatre, and I enjoy being flexible and more interactive, adding sections to be improvised and leaving more space for the actors and the audience (Sierz, 2012: 210).

In his extensive « Notes » to Act Two of *Dissocia*, he therefore writes that « much of the dialogue in this act – especially in the first scenes – is little more than sound effect, and the actors should be encouraged to improvise these scenes, using the dialogue as a guideline only, in order to achieve the maximum realism » (Neilson, 2008: 270). Vicky Angelacki discloses « a well-known fact about Neilson's work process, namely that he allows the text to be re-morphed through rehearsals » (Aragay & Monforte, 2014: 136). If such practices are far from unheard of in contemporary British theatre, Neilson seems particularly radical and relentless in his adoption of them[11]. By his own admission, the thematic and formal demands of *Dissocia* – the considerable challenge of stag-

11 In a recent interview with Trish Reid, Anthony Neilson acknowledges the influence of playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, whose innovative approach to theatre-making is « a great inspiration » (Reid, 2017: 149). In his close examination of Neilson's work process, Gary Cassidy underlines that although he is not the only playwright of his generation to use such methods, his approach nevertheless yields singular results: « Neilson's process is marked by arbitrariness, uncertainty and, on occasion, a degree of incoherence and fragmentation. While I am not implying that Neilson's process is unique in this respect, it remains important to acknowledge the chaotic structure of his rehearsals. Neilson's modus operandi problematizes conventional assumptions about significance, relevance and meaning because it is informed by, draws upon and is to some degree dependent on the random, tangential and erratic » (Reid, 2017: 162).

ing madness – led him to push the technique to the point where « it's about as intense as it could be », devising the play only after extensive cast improvisations which he calls « group-dreaming » (Cavendish, 2004).

Therefore in Neilson's alternative theatre-making – his heterotopian practice – the usual movement from page to stage seems to be partially, if not completely, reversed; the stage gradually shapes the page, as the introductory notes to the play explicitly state : « What follows is a transcript of the original production of this play, including notes – where relevant – for translators. Stage directions, costume and design notes are therefore to be viewed as a guide only, and not as strict dictations » (Neilson, 2008: 196). The play is no longer a pre-established text, no longer a prescriptive ensemble of « strict dictations », but a looser framework open to constant additions or revisions and devised in an extremely « flexible » fashion, within an interactive space.

Such formally adventurous techniques allow Neilson to push the boundaries and truly explore « other spaces », such as « the areas where the text ends and the lighting and the sound begins ». Neilson gives considerable weight to elements of performance other than written text, as evidenced by his attachment to *Dissocia*'s original stage design: « my advice would be to observe it to the extent that budget allows, as it is my belief that the overall concept serves the play well ». He further explains that « such a large expanse of carpet mimics the view we have of the world in infancy – the hope being that the audience will be subconsciously more imaginative as a result » (Neilson, 2008: 196). The need to engage and involve spectators, to « leave more space to the audience », is at the heart of Neilson's innovative staging/writing of *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, and what could be referred to as its postdramatic sensibilities.

A postdramatic space?

As mentioned above, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* was designed (on page and on stage) to encourage the audience's immersion in the subjective experience of madness. A pioneer of experiential theatre, Neilson is as adamant as was Sarah Kane about producing « a theatre that privileges felt experience in a theatrical context over other types of engagement, such as intellectual or aesthetic » (Reid in Sierz, 2012: 139). Like Kane's, Neilson's experiential plays of the 1990s were often deemed instances of in-yer-face theatre[12], also known as New Brutalism, where the violent and taboo-breaking events unfolding on stage guaranteed the audience a truly « visceral » experience.

Both Neilson and Kane, however, distanced themselves from in-yer-face aesthetics and moved beyond mere shock tactics in their later work, although they differ considerably in their approach to and rendering of the experience of madness. In contrast to Kane's text-based, minimalist and enigmatic drama of

12 As Trish Reid notes, « [e]ach of Neilson's major 1990s plays can be meaningfully described as shocking, taboo-breaking and bold – involving as they do scenes of explicit violence, masturbation and defecation – and as such they fit rather neatly into Sierz's definition. Subsequently, the label has been applied to Neilson in a number of contexts » (Sierz, 2012: 138).

suffering in *4.48 Psychosis*, Neilson seeks to engage the audience by captivating and entertaining them. As he has stated himself: « I'm more interested in ensuring that people's experience in the theatre is an interesting or surprising one » (Reid, 2007: 489)[13]. While Kane seems to focus predominantly on the materiality of language in her final elaboration of an experiential theatre, Neilson's consistently explores and exploits the materiality of the live event, which according to Trish Reid, places his post-2000 work in the wake of what Hans-Thies Lehmann has christened « postdramatic theatre ».

Contrary to the dramatic paradigm where *theatre* (the specific art of staging) was subordinated to the text (in Lehmann's terms, *drama* refers exclusively to a literary genre), postdramatic theatre privileges *situation* over action, and *performance* over representation, using the text only as one of several basic materials in the fashioning of a *stage event* aiming for pure presentation, even « presentification »[14]. Neilson's play aims to capitalize on the *joint presence* of actors and spectators in the communal space of the theatre[15]. « Spectacle », a term which according to Lehmann offers a general and succinct description of postdramatic theatre, is at the heart of Neilson's practice and preoccupations, and explains among other things the inclusion of three songs into *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*:

> Musical theatre offers song and dance, of course; a certain unpretentiousness; a tangible sense of « *liveness* »; magic; and, most importantly, *spectacle*.
>
> It's time the « serious » theatre learns this lesson. We have to give the audience what they can't get anywhere else. […] We can offer them « *liveness* », but few plays, or productions, take advantage of this. […] The *spectacle* we can offer is the *spectacle* of imagination in flight. […] There is nothing more magical and nothing – nothing – less boring. (Neilson, 2017, our emphasis)

In Neilson's play as in all postdramatic theatrical forms conceptualized by Lehmann, the text is only one of many heterogeneous languages used on stage, only one part of a mosaic of visual, gestural and musical elements all contributing to the « liveness » of the event and the liveliness of the « spectacle ». The unique « magic » of theatre is in the live encounter, the interaction in

13 Reid also points out in a more recent work that « Neilson's writing frequently foregrounds an audience's awareness of themselves as engaged in a practice of watching and reading the stage » (Reid, 2017: 178).

14 « Le théâtre postdramatique est théâtre qui exige 'un événement scénique qui serait, à tel point, pure présentation, pure présentification du théâtre qu'il effacerait toute idée de reproduction, de répétition du réel' [Sarrazac]. Il connaît la juxtaposition et la mise à niveau de tous les moyens confondus qui permettent au théâtre d'emprunter une pléthore de langages formels hétérogènes au-delà du drame » (Lehmann, 2002: 13).

15 « Le théâtre signifie : *une tranche de vie passée et vécue en communauté* par des acteurs et spectateurs dans l'air de cet espace respiré en commun où se déroulent le jeu théâtral et l'acte réceptif du spectateur. L'émission et la réception des signes et signaux *s'opèrent simultanément*. La représentation fait surgir du comportement sur scène et dans la salle un *texte commun* même s'il n'existe aucun discours parlé. […] La *situation théâtrale* forme une entité faite de nombreux processus de communication aussi évidents que dissimulés » (Lehmann, 2002: 19).

the moment, the situation dependent on the very *site*, *space* where the play is staged[16], and shaped by both performers and audience[17] during the course of a shared experience.

Neilson cherishes the element of ephemerality and unpredictability[18] inherent to « show-making », which in turn leads to innovation and renovation, both theatrical and textual. As Lehmann himself pointed out, postdramatic forms of theatre, while often separating page from stage, also contribute to devising new ways of writing and staging texts[19]. Neilson's self-described « drive-yourself-to-the-point-of-breakdown theatre writing » (Neilson in Logan, 2007), exemplified by *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, keeps driving theatre to the point of breakthrough, expanding its space of creativity and calling for a renovation of critical categories. Neilson, in his restless exploration of « realms that are yet to come », devises each new play as a heterotopia of innovation, a challenge to performers and audiences to transform their ways of acting and reacting.

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16 This is particularly the case in what has been called since the late 1980s « site-specific theatre », « described as 'performance specifically generated from or for one site' » (Field, 2008).

17 It should be stressed that, although the co-presence of actors and spectators created ideal conditions for Neilson's experiments in the early 2000s, various playwrights now experiment with absence as well as presence, incorporating new technologies into contemporary theatrical shows, for instance.

18 Sarah Kane also made unpredictability the defining characteristic of a truly visceral performance and experiences; in a well-known article for *The Guardian* entitled « Drama with Balls » (20/08/1998), she calls for plays to be as riveting and unpredictable as football games.

19 « Ainsi est devenue envisageable la séparation du texte et de la scène, mais également la perspective des nouvelles stratégies d'une réunification éventuelle. Alors que le texte de théâtre est considéré comme un élément poétique indépendant et que – dans le même temps – la 'poésie' de la scène s'affirme comme poésie autonome de l'atmosphère, de l'espace et de la lumière, un dispositif théâtral s'installe dans la sphère du possible qui […] envisage la séparation radicale puis à nouveau la libre combinaison du texte et de la scène. On peut constater que (depuis la fin des années 1990) se développe justement cette recherche de nouvelles possibilités des agencements de langue et des moyens scéniques » (Lehmann, 2002: 89).

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