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Report from ... Wales

The Ever After Project: Considering theatre and performance in the era of Covid-19

Andrew Filmer with Mike Brookes, Zoe Laughlin and Mike Pearson

The Ever After Project was conceived in April 2020, during the initial period of lockdown across the United Kingdom in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As businesses were shuttered, personal movement was restricted, and social distancing was introduced, the closure of theatres and live entertainment venues saw performance move rapidly online. Alongside the live-streaming of pre-recorded performances, original shows for online platforms were developed and ‘Zoom theatre’ entered the lexicon. In theatre, as in other areas, the suspension of activities offered an opportunity to reflect upon and reassess past practices, and to think about how they could be re-worked or replaced. ‘Let’s take advantage of the enforced suspension of most activities,’ wrote Bruno Latour in an essay in March, ‘to set out the inventory of those among them we would like to see not coming back, and those, on the other hand, that we would like to see develop.’ (2020: 3) In mid-April, director and performer Mike Pearson invited collaborators to propose ‘a project that reflects upon and imagines possible futures for theatre in Wales (and beyond) post-virus, and beyond Zoom performances.’ Mike approached his long-term collaborator, artist and director Mike Brookes; artist, broadcaster and director of the Institute of Making at University College London Zoe Laughlin; and Andrew Filmer, a lecturer at Aberystwyth University.

Conceived as a conceptual, design-led project, with research and creative aspects, the aim of *Ever After* was to inform and stimulate new practices in the production and staging of theatre and its administration in the era of Covid-19. Our approach to National Theatre Wales (NTW), was received positively. NTW, like many arts organizations, was wrestling with the significant challenges of how to operate in radically changed circumstances. In response to Covid-19 the company had cancelled some projects, while others were continuing online. Aware of their position in Wales, NTW were receptive to a project that might facilitate reflection and reappraisal and suggest new directions. Since their founding in 2010 as Wales’ English-language national theatre, NTW have operated as a non-venue based company, forging a significant track record of located and context specific productions performed

across the nation. Free from having to maintain the physical infrastructure of a theatre, they could reflect in quite broad terms on alternative ways of making and producing theatre.

In helping to assist NTW in assessing the likely impacts of Covid-19 on theatre-making and theatre-going, we sought to conceive viable ways forward by imagining and proposing transferable principles, proposals, prototypes, models and recommendations for new approaches to the practices of theatre. Programmatically, we structured the project as an enquiry and a creative process in six fortnightly thematic blocks: Assembly, Relationships, Materiality & Design, Space & Architecture, Techniques & Expression and Production Processes. Methodologically, the project ran as two parallel strands of enquiry and creative thinking – one comprised of us, as members of what we called the ‘research group’, and the other a self-selecting group of colleagues from NTW, convened by Head of Production, David Evans. We formulated the thematic frames and a set of accompanying open questions for each of the six thematic blocks, as well as reference materials that provided a springboard for NTW staff to formulate and frame their own questions and encourage new areas of thinking. The questions were grounded in a reflection on the current operational realities facing the company, but also gradually shifted focus towards the consideration of conceptual, strategic and creative responses. While the two groups functioned in parallel, they deposited material in a shared online folder at regular intervals, creating an asynchronous dialogue. Although it lies outside the scope of this account, the facilitated weekly discussion, idea-sharing and reflection *Ever After* facilitated amongst colleagues at NTW was an important strand of the project, offering a valuable means for the company to reflect on past work and current processes and to think about the future.

The initial stage of the project culminated in a report provided to NTW in October 2020 which outlined a set of propositions and questions for potential application in their work. As our conversation developed, events shifted quickly, and the moment in which the project had been conceived seemed to pass as the initial shock, tumult, and adrenalin of the pandemic gave way to more mundane – but no less challenging – ‘new’ realities. This account traces out the trajectory of our discussions over the initial twelve weeks of the project conducted between late May and early September. At the end we outline ten propositions, in the hope that they may prove useful for stimulating thinking and making.

Assembly

Suppose that we are gathering ...

We started by considering what the nature of theatrical assembly in the age of Covid-19 and beyond might be, by looking to the street for clues, and to the ways that we are already and always finding – and re-finding – to self-organise and perform ourselves in the less defined public spaces we have to live in. In an act of contemporary archaeology, Zoe catalogued the various graphic representations of social distancing evident on the streets of London, examining their relationship to scale. What was the emerging iconography of social distancing and how was this forming an understanding of what two metres is? The practice of social distancing had introduced new patterns, conventions and geometries to everyday life, and the wearing of masks – a largely voluntary and contested practice at this point – was performed as an act of care towards others. Links between perceptions of risk and practices of people management and care were important: it is one thing to satisfy governmental rules when assembling, but another to agree to mutually satisfactory behaviours in that assembly. How were we negotiating the presence of each other in the street, and in shops, and parks? Images of protest gatherings in Tel Aviv and Athens showed demonstrators gathered in neat 2m intervals across public squares, while the eruption of the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd evidenced how furious political contestation relies on the close proximity of bodies. Mike Pearson considered the proxemics and interpersonal conventions of assembly: might dendritic (branched) forms be more effective in offering ways of arranging bodies at two metre intervals? Perhaps spherical forms more accurately revealed the spatial envelope required around each person to stem the spread of infection and to lower the perception of risk to a satisfactory level.



Figure 1. 1:100 scale drawing of a car and figures over two metre social distancing signage. Image and drawing: Zoe Laughlin.

If it was clear from our consideration of assembly that theatre faced a profound problem of not knowing how to go on, it was also clear that alternative or experimental forms of performance (durational, peripatetic, landscape, installation, autoteatro, intermedial) offered various ways forward.¹ The theatre auditorium – as Andrew suggested – had become a space of paranoia; the widely-circulated image of the ‘gap-toothed’ auditorium of the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin – with swathes of its seats removed – merely reinforced the pervasive sense of the virus’ presence and revealed the extent to which the theatre auditorium is an anthropocentric apparatus, adapted to particular ecological conditions. Perhaps, in re-thinking possibilities for the spatial conditions of assembly, we need to do what Una Chaudhuri (2018) with the members of Climate Lens call ‘the scalar slide’, a movement between the tiny and the vast in which we might mark connectedness, but where the human-scale is no longer the measure of all things.

¹ This point made in two online articles published on the same day in May 2020, one in *Exeunt* (Saville 2020) and the other in *Vulture* (Davidson 2020).

Relationships

What if we imagine a live event performed within that gathering?

In the second thematic block we considered the relationships inherent to performance: in what ways – post pandemic – might we re-imagine spatial relations and physical communication? Here we looked for clues in a case study: NTW’s 2012 production of *Coriolanus* – directed by Pearson and Brookes. Staged in a vast concrete aircraft hangar, the production supplied the audience with headphones, and relayed the action via cameras and two large cinema screens installed side by side at one end of the space. This allowed the dramatic action to move quickly from one location to another, whilst enabling the audience to see and hear everything and to negotiate their own spatial positioning in relation to that action; and folding the movements and behaviours of spectators into the action itself.

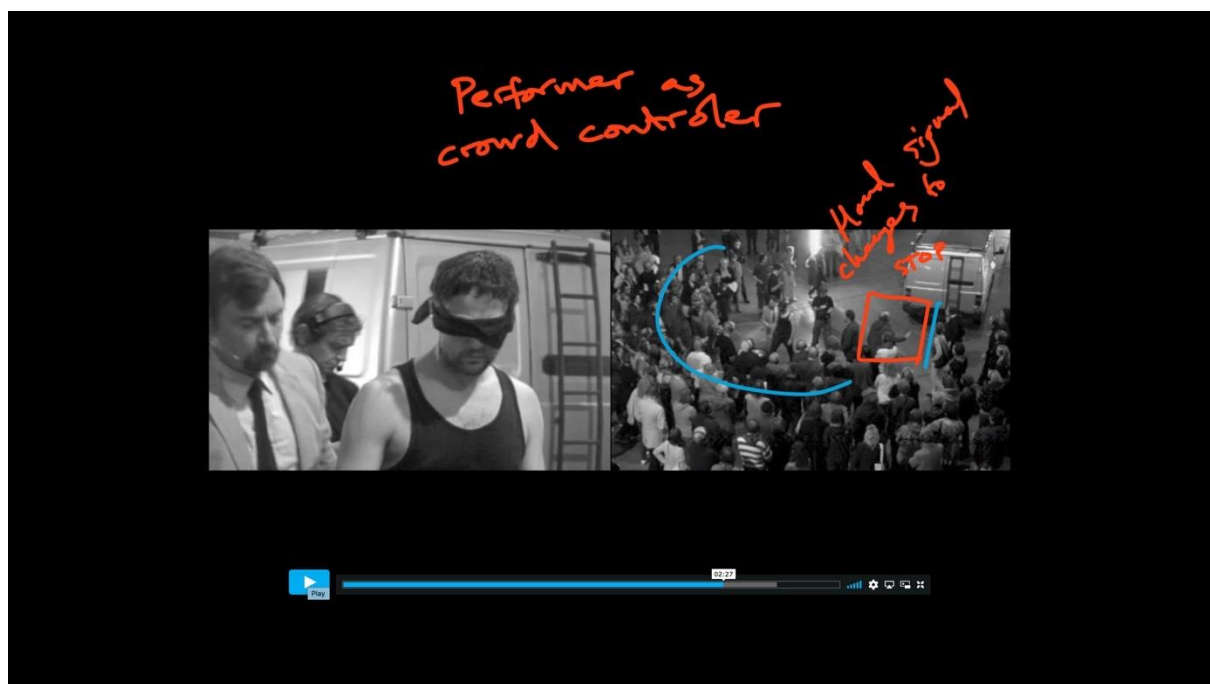


Figure 2. Screenshot of the video documentation of *Coriolanus*, demonstrating the multiple perspectives offered by different camera feeds. Image: Pearson/Brookes, drawing: Zoe Laughlin.

Watching documentation of *Coriolanus* highlighted certain behaviours: how spectators stood back to watch, how they followed the action through the space, how they crowded together at particularly intense moments, and how performers operated as crowd controllers. Re-viewed in the midst of a pandemic, aspects of the production were problematic: it relied on moments

of close spatial relationship to generate intensity; the connection that goes along with immersivity means that people forget where they are and who they are with as the realities of being with others are overtaken by the physical proximity of the action; and around all this, the logistics of production, use of ancillary spaces, and of marshalling audiences into and out of the performance space, would clearly be problematic. But the hangar itself with its vast size and open floor ('a landscape with a lid') suggested a useful laboratory space for experiment, and the intermedial dramaturgy of the production suggested promising avenues. In *Coriolanus*, intermediality was built into the dramaturgy of the production in a profound way. With two screens for spectators to view there was always more than one image to engage with. If live streaming performance opens up access to multiple audiences who may or may not be physically present then perhaps such streaming might serve to *supplement* live performance – in the Derridean sense of both augmenting and replacing it. But this would need to be designed as part of the overall aesthetic of performance rather than as an add-on, with implications for what sort of spaces might be best used, and the sorts of infrastructure they might require.

Materiality & Design

What if that live event includes physical things other than us?

Running through our discussions was a concern with the material realities of theatre and performance and its entanglement with things. The third thematic block considered the logistics of objects and touch as well as concerns with sustainable practice, cognisant of the fact that materials used in theatre are embedded in complex systems of production, processing and distribution. Zoe's colour-coded inventory of 189 discarded gloves found on the streets of London illustrated the new material realities of the pandemic and the mountains of waste produced through single-use personal protective equipment. Explaining how 'every contact leaves a trace', Zoe mapped relationships of projection, amplification and infiltration between solids, liquids and gases, underlining the difficulties of containing gases and the problem of breath in the dispersal of viral particles via aerosols and droplets. Mike Brookes re-examined some of the developments in the everyday – how, in our everyday lives, we are working out conventions around the problems of passing objects on from one set of hands to the next, how we decide what we do and don't touch, and how, in situations where we must

touch surfaces and objects, we are required to trust and surrender our management of interactions to others. Mike also dwelt on how ‘contactless’ technologies are touching increasing aspects of our lives, raising questions about who is privileged and who side-lined in the spread of new technologies. Andrew was interested in the V&A museum blog Pandemic Objects (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/pandemic-objects>) which has catalogued the changing functions and meanings of objects including nitrile gloves, home-made face masks, flour, balconies, door handles, home-made signs, spreadsheets, public parks and convention centres. How might these shifting meanings infiltrate stage design and how might stage design respond to the need for greater hygiene? Mike Pearson suggested that scenography in a post-pandemic age might become more akin to project design – entailing a form of planning that through careful attention to layouts, ground plans and circulation of people and objects, would help to curtail potentially unruly elements or effects in performance. He also proposed we attend to Japanese Noh theatre as offering a different mode of perception of objects in performance. Noh presents a closed, aesthetically fixed system where objects are limited, portable, and always associated with a given performer. Single props might represent a multiplicity of other objects. Might Noh present an exemplar for performance in a post-pandemic age, where theatre could be constituted through a constrained but multi-functional kit of parts?

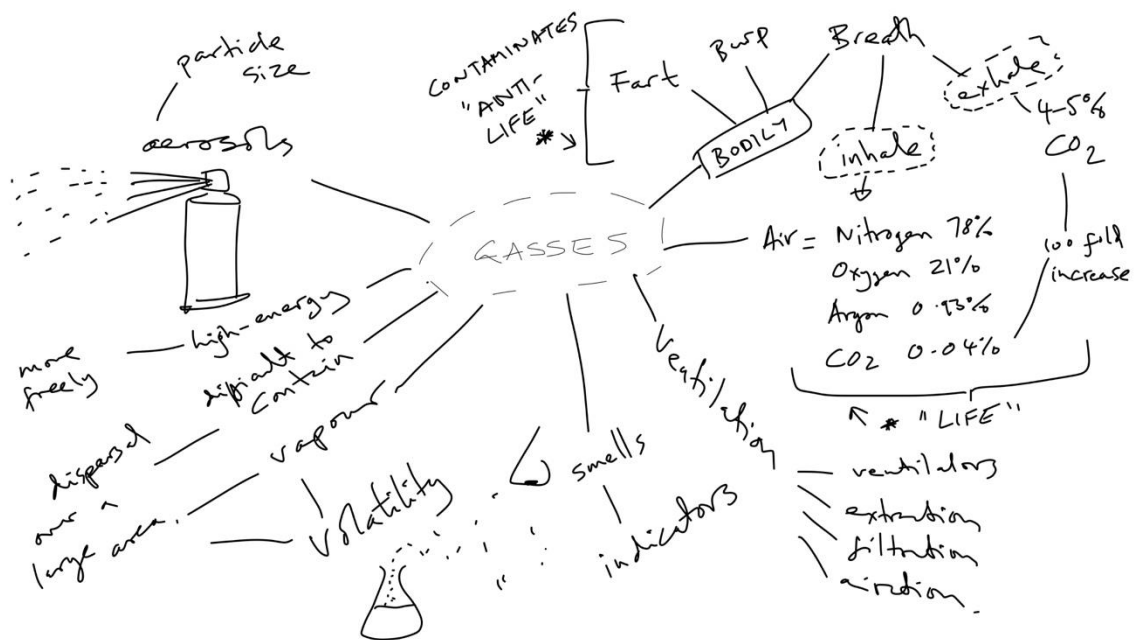


Figure 3. Diagram mapping the properties of gases. Drawing: Zoe Laughlin.

Space & Architecture

What if where and how we have gathered is no longer the best situation for all this to happen?

A questioning of what sorts of theatre spaces or auditoria might best enable performance to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic formed a key thread throughout our discussions. Since the *Coriolanus* case study we started to refer in short-hand to the possibility of a ‘new’ or ‘infrastructural’ auditorium – less an architectural object and more a malleable machine for seeing and hearing that might be deployed in different spaces and places; which would allow for dispersed gathering; and in which an intermedial infrastructure might enable the broadcasting of that event to others. In Madrid in June, Mike Brookes attended a performance in a re-opened 400-seat theatre, reporting back that, ‘the form felt very weird’. Despite the requirements for masks, the careful ushering, and the taking of temperatures before entering, the theatre didn’t feel like a safe space to be. Allowing individual responsibility felt preferable, because it allowed for negotiation and improvisation, much as public space does. Zoe crystallized these ideas in proposing the concept of the ‘threshold of responsibility’ in which the theatre space sits between the rules of the house and the rules of the landscape, between private and public. Such a concept foregrounds the negotiation between individual and institutional responsibility for managing risk in performance. Large post-industrial performance spaces – like Glasgow’s Tramway, or La Cartoucherie in Vincennes, or The Park Avenue Armory in New York – seemed most likely to accommodate gatherings of different sorts. But other models were considered – the three-dimensional reconfigurable matrix of Cedric Price’s Fun Palace, the circus tent, Amsterdam’s Mickery Theatre, the Noh theatre with its roof and open sides, an agricultural hay barn. How much shelter might an audience need and what sort of conventions and behaviours might each sort of shelter suggest? Perhaps performer and audience space could be taken apart entirely, separated into two contiguous but linked spaces? If audiences look first to theatre architecture for cues for how they locate themselves in relation to performance, then in open spaces such as these any cues need to be offered by the work itself. Any infrastructural auditorium could be conceived more as an event and a strategy than a discrete kit of parts, with performance and production existing as a context-sensitive assemblage.

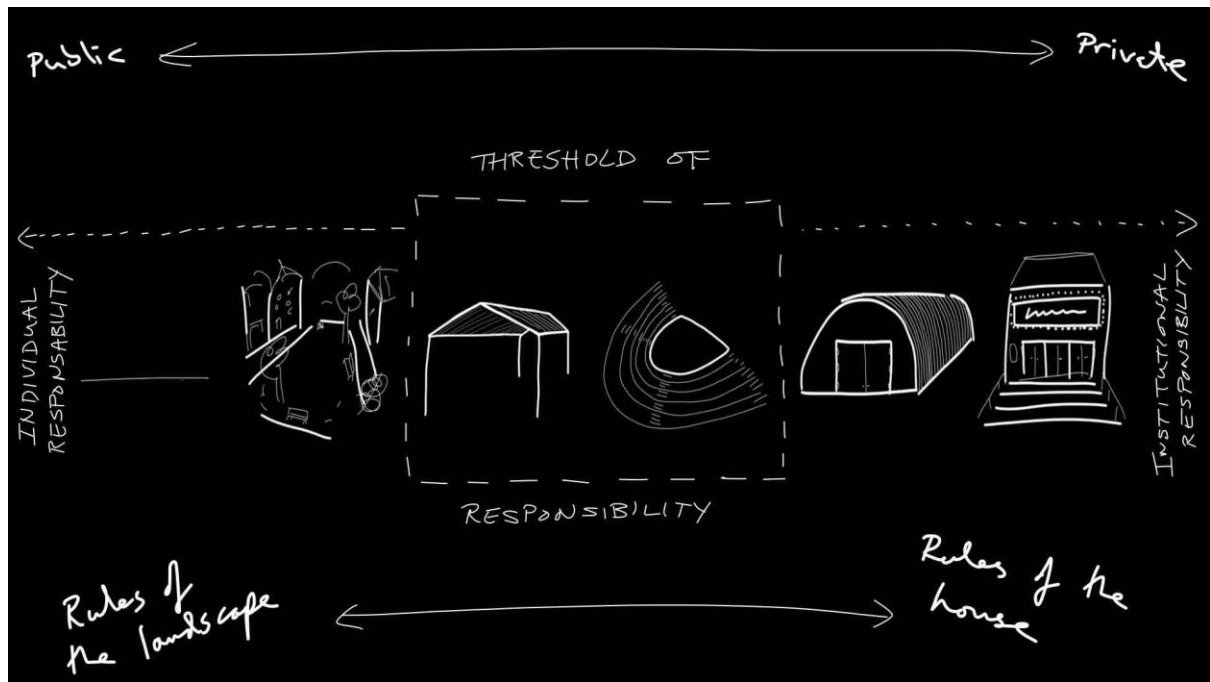


Figure 4. The ‘Threshold of Responsibility’. Drawing: Zoe Laughlin

Techniques & Expression

What if the way this is happening no longer makes sense for the way we have gathered?

Our fifth thematic block considered how techniques for dramatic expression and communication might need to be readjusted or substituted post-pandemic; or enhanced and extended through the inclusion of audio or video media. If one of the primary means of countering viral spread is through social distancing, then perhaps our focus might shift to creating work that looks best at a distance. One thread of discussion examined techniques for ‘locating’ an audience and for ‘bridging’ the distance between spectator and performance. How might we signal what a place is and how it works through clues in the physical and event architecture? Reflecting on his recent project with Rosa Casado, *The sky was clearer in those days* (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/brookescasado/albums>) (2019), Mike Brookes described possible techniques as ‘telescopes’, ‘megaphones’ and ‘ladders’, means of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard that might enable a kind of self-organisation in a given space. What might be the most effective and appropriate ways for locating an audience in relation to a given action? Might they be through shared telescopes or individual telescopes? Another thread focussed on performers themselves: Mike Pearson reflected on

working with Good News from the Future (<https://goodnewsfromthefuture.org.uk/>), a group exploring collaborative physical expression for the over-60s. At higher risk of severe illness from Covid-19 they had radically altered their working practices, meeting outdoors in parks to work at distance for what they termed ‘The Sunday Walk’. Pearson mused on how 1960s instructional performance might return and how working at distance suggested how performance might come apart, with different elements of performance treated as separately interacting strata. Zoe playfully re-staged a series of images from past pandemics. Her images served to mark the passing of time and operated as an homage to techniques of improvisation and bricolage, underlining the necessity of improvisation in the everyday world as much as in the theatre. What kind of training might post-pandemic performers require? Perhaps the sorts of techniques and expression required of performers already exists in a variety of alternative performance forms (performance art, site work, peripatetic work, intermedial work): performers need to be at home with reality – the reality of the situations and objects they are required to negotiate – to work with spectators as necessary components of situation and scene, and to negotiate multiple frames and positions. And, fundamentally, performers need to be able to work the apparatus of performance themselves. But not every skill would be required in every show. As much as the pandemic challenges performers’ technique and expression it also challenges the perceptive possibilities and capacities of the audiences with which they work.



Figure 5. Homage to techniques of improvisation and the paraphernalia of previous pandemics. Image: Zoe Laughlin

Production Processes

What if we know what we now want to happen where we are?

In the sixth and final thematic block we thought through what sorts of procedures and equipment for rehearsal, production and performance might be needed to enable performance to be made and staged. But already, through our discussions, a set of propositions and further questions had begun to emerge, focussed on a sense of space, an infrastructure, and a set of hypothetical or experimental programmes. The space would need to be big enough to shelter activities without constraining them, would need to enable and accommodate self-organisation, would need to have porous boundaries between ‘in’ and ‘out’ and between

‘residents’ and ‘visitors’, and would need to have in-built tools for amplification, telepresence and broadcast, whilst also enabling the use of tools that ‘visitors’ might already possess. In Wales – and beyond purpose-built venues – such a space might best take the form of an existing agricultural structure: a livestock shed, equestrian arena, a hay shed, or a ‘broadcastable dutch barn’ (Figure 6). Such a space might be used for experiments in preparation, staging and presentation to examine possible approaches to audience assembly, to the spatial and physical relationships between different orders of participant (performer/spectator, performer/performer, spectator/spectator), to different modes and techniques of dramatic expression, and to the integration of audio-visual technologies. Importantly, too, any brief for its use should encompass consideration of different experiences of risk, and incorporate an understanding of sustainability and production, with sustainability defined through processes rather than the potential recyclability of materials. In terms of event streaming we might consider the co-presence and position of multiple audiences, particularly the live in-person and the live digital. Such proposals are necessarily refracted through our aesthetic preferences but seek to be open to possibility in the face of an ever-evolving pandemic and the operational conditions it imposes on performance.



Figure 6. A proposal for a ‘Broadcastable Dutch Barn’. Image: Mike Pearson

So, as we come to terms with creating performance in changed and changing circumstances, within and emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when there is no consensus on how to proceed, when nothing is settled, we offer these ten propositions as invitations and provocations:

1. Conceive every production as an assemblage—of people, things, technologies, texts, ideas, regulations—gathered and mixed in different relationships, and to varying extents in order to generate meaning and effect in a particular context.
2. Picture every production as a work of project design: in which all elements—from comms. to risk assessment to questions of sustainability—are included in the conceptual process and inform and temper creative ambitions, choices and compositional practices from the outset. Making performance by trial and error in a rehearsal room may no longer be the most useful practice to employ.
3. Set the brief for every production: including the company's expectations for social distancing and communal hygiene; its attitudes to sustainability; its parameters for the employment of scenic and technical equipment; its requirements for access.
4. Adapt the form of performance as well as the subject matter according to context: it need not—in its duration, modes of address and relationship with an audience—attempt to replicate the conventions of the auditorium.
5. Adjust the scale of performance according to context, working from the very small to the very large; in an age of pandemics and rapid ecological change performance need not—in its scale, extent and fixed location attempt to replicate the scale and conventions of the auditorium.
6. It's unnecessary to demonstrate dramaturgical plenitude on every occasion: a project's basic components—text, action, scenography, soundtrack, technology—can be employed alone or can be composed in different combinations, and in varying ratios in space and time according to desire and necessity in a particular context.

7. It's unnecessary to engage everything performers can do— conventionally combined as character-driven acting—on every occasion: the use of voice and physical expression and engagement with media and technology can be present in different modes and with varying degrees of application according to desire and necessity in a particular context.
8. It's unnecessary to make sites resemble auditoria: use the spatial and cultural context to inform dramaturgical form and suggest appropriate modes of communication.
9. Enhance connectivity between performers and audience and extend the reach of performance through audio-visual technology: it can be in one place and many places simultaneously.
10. In seeking new models large and small—for taking performance to audiences and bringing audiences to performance—consider:
 - Historical and international theatre forms—such as Japanese Noh
 - Alternative and experimental theatre practices—durational, peripatetic, landscape, installation, autoteatro, intermedial
 - Traditional modes of expression in Wales: vocal forms such as *adrodd* (solo recitation), *cyd-adrodd* (choral recitation) and *pennillion* (improvised verse sung to musical accompaniment).

The Ever After Project: A National Theatre Wales (NTW) initiative in partnership with Aberystwyth University and the Institute of Making, University College London.

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