

# Transforming Presentation and Representation in Participatory Theatre Practice

## RESEARCHER

Professor Simon Banham

## THE OVERVIEW

*Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* introduced new approaches to participatory stage work that transformed the nature of performer, participant and audience engagement and experience. The work consisted of four inter-linked but distinct productions, realised over a three-year period, which were subsequently performed in their entirety across a 7-hour participatory performance cycle in Manchester in 2016 and Norwich in 2017. It engaged members of the general public in both the creation and performance of a self-reflective theatrical event, and embodied dramaturgical and scenographic investigations of the ethics and politics of presence and representation to create an epic exploration of place and personhood. The work enriched public appreciation and knowledge of the theatrical form and generated new ways of thinking that influenced contemporary production practices.



## THE RESEARCH

*Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* furthered a long-term investigation by Professor Simon Banham into the co-presence of performers and audience within the material realities of theatrical performance. It enabled audiences to encounter high quality artistic practice, created with local participants rather than trained performers, emphasising the performance of everyday life, through dramaturgies of interview, inquiry and instruction. In acknowledging the recognition and validation of 'self' as a core mechanism of theatre, *Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* shed new light on the mechanics of presentation, representation and presence.

It explored how a theatrical apparatus might invite an audience to both join and influence the process of construction being revealed to them. It examined two key concepts: firstly, to what extent could our working methodology stimulate recognition of and engagement with scenographic objects as actants within performance; and second, what effect might the reconfiguration of a work's theatrical frame have upon the audience's experience of a performance.

## THE IMPACT

### BROADENING INDUSTRY PRACTICES

*Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* has been integral to key consequential commissions within the theatre industry, most notably the creation of a major site-specific participatory event for the Manchester International Festival (MIF) in 2017. *What is the City but the People?*, a one-off public opening event for MIF17, was live streamed by the BBC and structured the presentation of a curated selection of Manchester residents on a purpose-built 66m-long catwalk constructed within the city's centre, engaging local residents as both its subject and cast, and proposing a consciously theatrical and presentational frame that sought to enable an exploration of the presentation of self within a representation of the city.

### ENRICHING PUBLIC APPRECIATION AND IMAGINATION

*Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* enriched public appreciation and knowledge of the theatrical form by generating new forms of artistic expression. It enabled audiences to engage with scenographic environments and participative dramaturgies in a relational frame, shifting the focus and perspective away from direct artistic appreciations of composition to favour an experience of the aesthetic event from within. It encouraged audiences and communities to imagine and present themselves as participants in artistic practices of representation. Total audience figures reached 7,366. As shown both by the testimony of those who participated and the feedback from the audience, the production provoked new ideas and stimulated considerable debate on fundamental aspects of

contemporary theatre. Audience members remarked how the work was 'unique' and 'inspiring'.

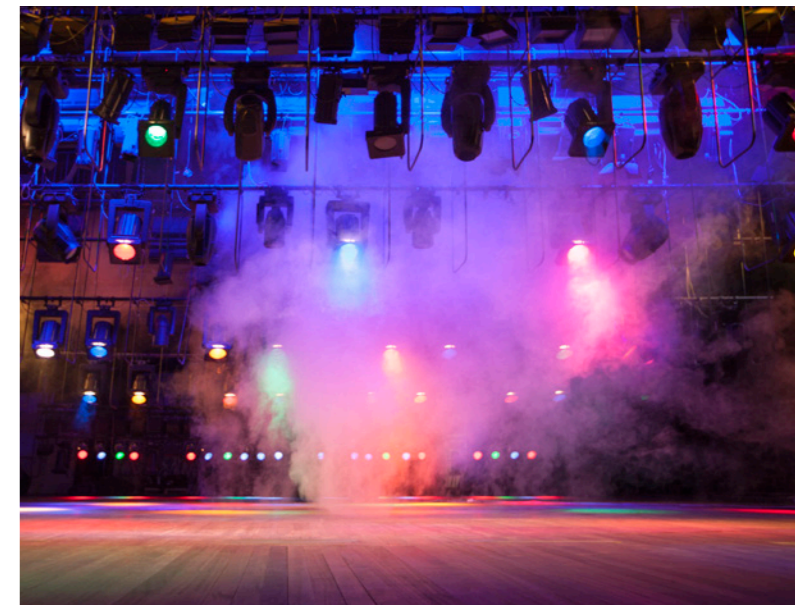
*What is the City but the People?* also attracted large audiences and secured international reach (approximately 6,000 attended the event and over 10,000 watched it live online). The production was voted 'Best Event' at the 2018 Manchester Culture Awards

Both productions were widely covered in the UK press, on television and radio, and were extensively reviewed. A BBC live stream of *What is the City but the People?* is still available on BBC iPlayer.

### INFLUENCING CONTEMPORARY PRODUCTION PRACTICES

The exploratory approaches underpinning *Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* required new organisational structures and production priorities to be developed in collaboration with each producing context, to conceive and implement production procedures that would allow and support the intended modes of integration and engagement of local participants and audiences within the work's creation and performance.

The specific nature and structure of the quartet of distinct works that formed *Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring* demanded a different working relationship be agreed and planned with festivals and promoters producing the work, opening up new ways of embedded locational working practices appropriate to each context.



It enabled audiences to encounter high quality artistic practice, created with local participants rather than trained performers, emphasising the performance of everyday life, through dramaturgies of interview, inquiry and instruction.