

Spatial Transformation:  
Action Design in the Work of Lucidity Suitcase Intercontinental

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Lucidity Suitcase Intercontinental is a young experimental company under the direction of Thaddeus Phillips, who has as much experience in design and multimedia as he does in acting and directing. Phillips' background lends a unique perspective to the company's devised work, which is marked by installation-like sets, innovative uses of technology and media, and above all, what they call "transformational scenography." The productions' technical elements go beyond mere aesthetics and focus on the functionality and interactivity of the theatrical environment. Individual set pieces become as important as characters, and slight alterations to these objects can effect shifts into entirely new surroundings.

In conjunction with the idea of transformational scenography, Phillips and the company view their creation process as "action design." That is, the work is not solely driven by technical elements, but by actions of all sorts, including those performed by characters. To borrow a definition from design scholars Dennis Christilles and Delbert Unruh, "'Action Design' designates an approach to scenography that is physically and psychologically functional, and intimately interactive with the actor" (121). It embraces physicality and mines the power of even the subtlest of actors' movements. Despite these foundations, and the fact that character and plot seem to take a backseat during the development process, the finished products are such complete works of theatre that even the most conservative theatre-goers can recognize and appreciate the work as fully developed drama. But, at least in the case of the company's recent piece *WHaLE OPTICS*, they are dazzled by its visual ingenuity as well.

Though unusual, the ensemble's development process is not entirely unique. Numerous influences, both on the process and on their overriding ethos of transformational scenography and its essential component, action design, are identifiable. Without falling resolutely into one particular school, the work displays many attributes of physical theatre, most obviously in its emphasis on characters' motions, both emphatic and subtle. There is also a heavy reliance on media, with numerous video and projection screens, their wiring exposed unabashedly, in the style of the Wooster Group. The company's most evident forebear is Robert Lepage, whose imagistic imprint permeates the work. In addition to the company's general style of theatre-making, explicit nods to Lepage's work can be found. In one piece, for instance, a seated character sits in front of a moving video backdrop, which creates an image of a boat ride, a technique that is a hallmark of Lepage's work.<sup>1</sup>

Phillips makes no secret of Lepage's influence, and cites a performance of the Québécois artist's seminal piece *The Dragons' Trilogy* as the moment that crystallized Phillips' own vision. Beyond simply witnessing the work, Phillips went on to work for Lepage, touring with Lepage's company Ex Machina. Intertwining with Lepage's influence, it is also possible to trace the thread of action design to Phillip's post-collegiate studies at the Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) in Prague, where Czech scenographer and action design pioneer Jaroslav Malina held court. Identifying this type of distinctly European latter 20<sup>th</sup>-century scenography, Arnold Aronson, in his introduction to *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography*, describes it as

“carr[ying] a connotation of an all-encompassing visual-spatial construct as well as the process of change and transformation that is an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage” (7). Identifying action design as a central method of European avant-garde theatre, Phillips wholeheartedly embraced Malina’s advocacy of using nontraditional materials and techniques to transform the stage, adopting the mantra that no elements of a piece are merely background; everything is functional. While Malina has certainly had countless students, and Lepage numerous imitators, few have blended their aesthetics into something as seamless and successful as Phillips’ transformational scenography.

*WHaLE OPTICS* premiered in September, 2011 at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, after a nearly two-year development period which included occasional work-in-progress showings and engagement with the public. It is an epic piece in three parts, and runs nearly three hours long. *WHaLE OPTICS* is both the title of the play and the name of a project within the play (or are they one and the same?). The purpose of the project is to study whale songs, attempt to decipher them, discover if and how fiber optic cables running along the ocean floor disrupt the whales, and perhaps even to communicate with humpbacks. There are two main characters and several peripheral ones. Toshi, a renowned composer working with the research team, struggles with Ahab-like fervor to track down an elusive whale. The other most prominent character, Roger, is a fiber optics technician working in an isolated shack on the coast of New Jersey, from which he monitors the systems that carry the internet across the Atlantic Ocean, linking the United States to Europe and much of the world.

The themes are weighty, and the ground covered is expansive. With video clips of Carl Sagan’s classic 1980 PBS series “Cosmos” interspersed throughout the action (some unadulterated, others altered), Sagan acts as a guide of sorts, expounding on topics that range throughout time and around the globe; he lectures on the formation of the universe, the evolution of whales, the library of Alexandria in ancient Egypt, and the Voyager space probe with its “Sounds of Earth” recording hurtling through the universe at the outskirts of our solar system. The most central of the show’s themes, communication and connectivity, sprang from two tangible pieces of inspiration: a dog-eared chapter on whale song in a second-hand Sagan book, and a photograph of a desolate fiber optics station. Fittingly, whale communication became a central element of the plot, and the fiber optics station became a key setting in the play. The fact that one seed gestated into plot/theme and the other into a physical setting that is integral to the piece is illustrative of the work’s aesthetic: tangible objects and environments are essential foundational elements; they are not secondary to story and theme.

Though the two key pieces of the show’s inspiration were manifested in different forms, their functions are not necessarily divergent. Throughout the work, elements of the set, and their transformations, often parallel and elucidate plot lines and thematic ideas. Additionally, a handful of set pieces, chief among them an enormous white tarp, offer continuity throughout the piece. As they take on new forms and alter the playing space, creating new and often disparate environments, they seem to guide and reassure, fulfilling much the same role as the mesmeric Sagan. This continual thread links the various elements of the piece and plays into the idea of connectivity, just as real-world fiber optic cables connect all people and places both literally and figuratively.

This all speaks to the integration of its parts and the development of *WHaLE OPTICS* as a complete work of theatre in which the traditional components are not

entirely subsumed by the technical elements. But what makes it remarkable – what gives the work its power and magic – is its ability to conjure entirely different worlds out of very few elements. The aforementioned white tarp is the most essential of the set pieces. It is sail-like in its enormity, with several incongruous markings. Along with some cuts and seams, it also has various small hooks and grommets, all of which the audience thinks nothing of until their functions become apparent. At the opening of the show this tarp is used as a barrier that delineates the playing space, blocking off the plush auditorium from view and making the potentially vast space feel intimate. The audience, rather than sitting in the usual rows of upholstered seats, is seated on either side of the stage itself, immersed in the action by mere proximity. Entering through the doors of the auditorium as if it will be a typical seating arrangement, we must walk all the way down the aisles, past a lone inflatable boat perched in the orchestra stalls (signaling that this is not seating but rather the expansive abyss of the ocean), and cross the proscenium. The tarp ensconces the audience, along with the players, in the world of the play.

Throughout the performance the tarp is moved to create new settings. At one point, as it is ruffled and piled into a swirling mass on the floor, we find ourselves in Antarctica. (The snow, ice, and cold are palpable, and the transition is as sudden as the polar hallucination in *Angles in America*.) Another time the tarp is hooked and hoisted, and becomes a wall to a restaurant through which the actors suddenly waltz, unzipping a doorway in the fabric that we didn't even know existed. The most impressive of the tarp's invoked environments are the seascapes. Laid smoothly on the floor, it is the icy surface of the ocean on which a boat bobs. But as soon as a man jumps overboard, the surface begins to rise, pulled into the fly space, and (with the aid of some blue lighting), we sink with the stationary actor and are rapidly plunged into the deep. Finally, in the climactic scene the most miraculous transformation of all occurs: the tarp becomes Toshi's elusive White Whale, looming above us. The placement of hooks and markings shape the fabric into the fully realized beast, with striated throat grooves, contoured belly, and knowing eyes.

Weaving into the ideas of the story, and affirming that this visual playfulness is not solely inserted into the work for the sake of impressing with fancy illusions, the tarp's varied manifestations further the thematic message throughout the play. Not only is the climactic conjuring of the great whale moving because of its sudden incarnation, but for other reasons as well. It is the culmination of the storyline, as the whale, and the key to interspecies communication that he holds, has finally been found. Lest theme take a backseat to plot, the quest has ended in Antarctica, the only place on the globe that is not connected by human-laid fiber optic cables. Perhaps the one place where high-tech communication is impossible is the only place where true, instinctive, old-fashioned communication can flourish.

Although beautifully integrated into the piece as a whole, the scenography is what steals the show throughout, and the tarp is not the sole set piece whose numerous actions and multiple functions transform the space. There is also a rolling unit of scaffolding that is completely convincing as both a dive shop off the coast of Colombia and a large ship churning through frigid Pacific waters. The fly space is utilized effectively, as descending library lamps are all we need to know that we are suddenly in the New York Public Library, and a lobster trap hovering at ceiling-height signals unequivocally that we are in a Red Lobster restaurant. When that same trap lowers

farther and crashes into the stage floor, we are obviously now at the bottom of the ocean. Minimal lighting effects assist these transitions, and sometimes even create spaces on their own: a wash of blue for the ocean scenes, fluorescents for offices, and even a simple square of bright light and a dinging sound for a completely convincing elevator.

Not surprisingly given its integration into the play's plot and overarching ideas, the set's malleability often functions as a concrete mirror of character development as well. The best example of this occurs when Roger, an awkward and isolated man, yearns to forge a connection with a pretty UPS delivery woman. He goes on an online shopping bender, ordering innumerable packages so that she will repeatedly show up on his doorstep. As the boxes pile up in his small office he quickly becomes cocooned by cardboard. His attempt at connection is paradoxical: as he reaches out in his desire to initiate a relationship with the woman, his inability to pursue her beyond his own comfort zone physically closes him off in his own small world. The visual image is striking, and also infused with lighthearted hilarity.

In keeping with the idea of "action design" not applying solely to technical elements but to all action within the show, actors' motions often affect, or even effect, their environments. An actor's languorous breaststroke, for instance, transports us into the water and along for a swim. Set pieces and actors often function together. A character might shiver while standing next to what had previously been a stack of UPS deliveries, and clearly the boxes have transformed into an Antarctic ice floe. Or someone walks precariously down an angled plank and cautiously steps off and wobbles; unquestionably, he has just boarded a small boat. The culminating moment of Roger's storyline comes after he has performed a heroic maneuver to restore communication cables for all of North America. As he returns from his triumph, he slowly transforms into his idol, Carl Sagan. Dressed in the scientist's classic outfit, Roger bends down and rolls up his pants. The motion, along with the sound of the crashing ocean, is all that is needed to signal that he is stepping back into the lapping waves of an imagined seascape, the setting of so many Sagan videos.

In addition to articulating their environments, characters sometimes move for the sake of the motion itself. The synchronized, graceful, and expressive movements add another dimension to the work, at times transforming the play into a dance performance. Slow, undulating movements signal underwater diving; a group of characters at a table move in a choppy choreographed rhythm to play a card game; a mating dance typical of humpback whales is enacted by awkward humans during their bumbling courtship, complete with narration ("breaching!" "body-rolling!").

The action design of *WHaLE OPTICS* makes it a remarkable piece of theater. Its themes and characters are interesting and entertaining, but not revelatory or even particularly noteworthy in and of themselves. These elements are secondary to the visual experience that the piece offers and to the delightful ingenuity that is on display. The dynamic, constantly shifting and surprising environments created by minimal set elements, combined with careful character actions, makes for a stimulating and thoroughly engaging work, achieving an immersive experience for the audience that moves the piece into the experiential realm.

Lucidity Suitcase Intercontinental's focus on transformational scenography and action design is masterminded by Phillips, but workshopping with an ensemble, especially one with formidable technical skills and talent, is essential for the creation of their shows. Since its founding in 2005 the company has not worked with a fixed

ensemble of members beyond Phillips himself, which is rather unusual for ensemble-based work, though there are of course repeat collaborators. This offers flexibility, as well as freedom from stale patterns of creation or long-term strife, but is certainly a challenge as well, with no dependable methods, intuitive interaction born of familiarity, or reliable results. Perhaps because of this, during their development process they use a loose approach of experimentation and improvisation, seeking out what works and rejecting the chaff. A long development period (about two years for *WHaLE OPTICS*), complete with public showings and solicited feedback, aids in the process of distilling hundreds of hours of experimentation into the twined connections and tight storyboarding that make up the few hours of the final cohesive piece. An essential element of the company's mission is the creation of original work that crosses theatrical boundaries and communicates with audiences in novel and powerful ways. The use of action design is their most direct method of achieving this goal.

Given the paramount place of action design in the company's aesthetic, it is not surprising that movement and improvisation with objects takes prime place throughout much of the development period. After all, this is the meat of the play; the plot and fine-tuning of the characters can be woven and expanded – in fact, entire scenes can be written – to fit the successful actions that are discovered in early rehearsals. In the case of *WHaLEOPTICS*, the company started with the vague ideas of underwater communication, whale song, and the photograph of the New Jersey fiber optics station. The piece's entire form, then, was fleshed out by striking upon successful motions and physical set transformations. At one early rehearsal, actors were asked to improvise a scene of underwater exploration, and the languid motions of deep sea creatures became an essential element of the fully realized scuba diving scenes. An exercise in inventing rhythmic slaps is identifiable as the root of a scene in which characters play a synchronized high-stakes card game. The game is deftly fitted into a convoluted plot, but the story would progress just fine without it; clearly, the card game scene is included solely for the sake of the delightful dance-like motions of the game players.

Along with the development of movement, objects and potential set elements enter the process in its formative stages. Experimentation with a large sail (Can it convey a cresting wave? A parachute?) led to the numerous transformational magic acts involving the white tarp. In rehearsal, a large trunk was used as a boat. A year later, that trunk had evolved into the multi-purposed rolling scaffolding mentioned earlier.

The long rehearsal period and loose approach also allow for a deep and meaningful interaction with technology, media, and other sources. It is no wonder that, after living with video of Carl Sagan expounding upon all elements of the universe for two years, Sagan (who is seen only on video, and imagined and interacted with in Roger's mind) feels like as much of an essential character in *WHaLE OPTICS* as any of those embodied by the flesh-and-blood actors. Sagan's texts, meaning both his book's chapter on whale song and, more so, his "Cosmos" videos, are raw materials that inform much of the show, and can be imagined as a central presence in the rehearsal room. The textual intervention performed upon his works is alternately subtle and apparent: his writings are explained by actors with varying levels of accuracy; sometimes clips of his lectures are played, unadulterated, on video screens; other times, those clips are cut, edited, or Auto-Tuned to varying effect. He has moved beyond source material and into the realm of physical, protean character.

Another important element of the development process, according to Phillips, is multiculturalism. Perhaps because of the European foundation of his style, and certainly influenced by his time touring with Ex Machina, the American-born Phillips cites travel as an essential research methodology for his company. While it is easy to see the impact of international training on the style of the work (especially the European sensibility imparted by Malina), it is harder to make out exactly how travel itself affects the company's creations. Based in both Philadelphia and Bogotá, Colombia, Lucidity Suitcase Intercontinental is rooted in internationalism, and perhaps this mere identity serves to open their work to different cultural ideas of theatre and performance, which can help to shape their development process. The multiculturalism of the ensemble (including Phillips' wife Tatiana Mallarino and frequent musical collaborator and composer Juan Gabriel Turbay, both of whom are Colombian), is certainly essential when setting a work in a foreign locale (their 2010 piece *!EL CONQUISTADOR!* is set in Colombia, and many scenes that were filmed in Bogotá are interspersed with the live action).<sup>2</sup>

When a work is not explicitly set in another country, though, the influence can be harder to detect. In *WHaLE OPTICS* a general sense of internationalism permeates, lending an intangible feeling of broadness, grandeur, and universal applicability. This is imparted both by the fact that travel is occurring within the show (from New York City and New Jersey to Buenaventura, Patagonia, and Antarctica), and also by the characters that are encountered, from a German DJ turned scuba diving instructor to a crew of Spanish-speaking fisherman. These international people and lands play into the piece's ideas of communication and integration, even though multiculturalism is not a foregrounded part of the work.

The company certainly has the potential to do more with the idea of travel as central to the formation of their pieces, especially since creating work that crosses cultural boundaries has been a cornerstone of their mission since its inception. If they can incorporate research from travel as a dramaturgical foundation, rather than simply using different countries as settings or multiculturalism as a theme, it may be a sufficiently unique element to propel them into the future. Even with this element not fully harnessed, the work is refreshing and their scenographic prowess is exhilarating. A crucial element of the work, and perhaps a sustaining one, is that it is not aggressively postdramatic. They manage to walk the thin line between media-saturated scenographic extravaganza and traditional drama that is at least in part beholden to a script (even if that script was written in conjunction with, or even after, the development of the action design). Rather than assuming the anti-text attitude so common among technical innovators and postmodern practitioners (for whom, in the words of Hans-Thies Lehmann, "the present actuality of the body's visceral presence take[s] precedence over logos" (145)), they instead take a page from Lepage's book and embrace elaborate storytelling and tangled plot lines as well as such classic trappings of theatre as theme and character.

By melding the classic pillars of theatre with the visual and immersive aspects of their action design, the company avoids alienating mainstream audiences and is able to appeal to a broad swath of theatre-goers without sacrificing excitement or innovation. Perhaps the themes aren't questions that will be pondered for the ages. Perhaps the characters won't become touchstones of literature. Perhaps the visual alterations are not full of elaborate trickery. The point of these illusions isn't to dazzle with technical

artifice – they are obviously makeshift. But we don't care. In fact, we relish them all the more because of their ingenuity. The magic of this transformational brand of theatre is in its experiential aspects, its “*shared energies*” (Lehmann 150): it sucks its audience into its world. Experiencing the actions along with the characters is as delightful as the transformative playground in which they occur.

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<sup>1</sup>The scene occurs in *THE MeLTING BRiDgE* (2008)

<sup>2</sup> Another recent work, 2011's *17 Border Crossings*, engages with travel head-on; it is an aptly named series of monologues detailing travel episodes.

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