

Mythic Events On Site

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The Ontopoetic Thing

Attention has been caught by the mythic performance events that I have helped facilitate and perform over the past 30 years. This is a brief history and rationale for the making of such events.

I am following Freya Matthews' ontopoetic sensibility and experience in a specific way. I mean; when an event or performance that we are creating within a natural site is met by something proactive, (ineffable) that comes to meet us from the Being of the site. When creating meets site meets a specific numinosity that emanates from that meeting.

There is a touch of D.W. Winnicott's psychotherapy ethic in this notion² - in that creative and therapeutic potential is set going between the creators of the event, the participants of the event and the ethos of the site. Ontopoetic event making within a site requires an ethical attitude involving respect for the site, its ecosystems, its history, its cultural associations and its inherent numinosity. When the ethos of a site is respected and worked with then, I suggest, there is some chance that the spirit of the place will respond to the human creativities brought into the potential of that space.

Winnicott's notion is of creative play and therapeutic vitality that takes place in a psychological and physical 'space' of potential that can be set up sensitively between persons. Winnicott's notion of 'potential space' implies setting up a creatively potent area of interaction and play between people (e.g. parent and child, therapist and client, persons and the place where we dwell).

The magnetic attraction held by and between persons becomes an area of potential in which something creative or illuminating might happen. The 'happening' thing is that Being/*Ontos* manifests, in the sense as touched upon by Freya Mathews in her philosophical tenderness; for now Being/*Ontos* has a chance to breath into the human imagination and be received and stimulate creativity. When receptive attention and empathy is alive between people, or between people and the place where we dwell, then a creative event can 'happen' and be received. *Poiesis* or creative life ignites in the intimate 'potential space'.

Sexual, erotic qualities of this interaction may be obvious and I want to state this obvious somatic, biological 'coming togetherness' because I am speaking here about performance and event-making based on primal and mythic stories and sensual engagement, heightened awareness and excitement that comes from participation in a potent ceremony in a vibrant site. This is a naturally erotic participation.

In ceremonial spaces and some forms of theatre a collective or shared 'potential space' is formed between performers, a participating audience and the 'spirits' of the story and the place – be it forest, river, rock, cave or sacred site. I have experienced this ontopoetic participation on a number of occasions including the Persephone events

described in this Journal. How or why this participation happens depends upon many things. Some of those things I will suggest here.

You may consider my language around evocation of the spirit of a site to be merely poetic talk, or perhaps romantic magical thinking. Maybe it is; maybe it isn't, but I have found that composing and directing performances from an onto-poetic attitude does produce surprising results. Analysing the psychology of *participation mystique* and 'site magic' is not my task here, however I can set out some main elements, or, if you like, 'the formula' of the creative interaction within the potential space of site, story and human imagination at work.

A Little History

In my own history I have, since about the age of 20, devised many performance works that turn around specific mythic themes that have caught my attention enough to want to perform or develop a variation of that theme; usually in an Australian setting.

Sometimes the events have been small neighbourhood performances involving children/families. Some have been weekend 'workshop' events usually connected to a Jungian training or interest group, some have been ceremonial like story telling, in an indigenous setting, on a hard theme – suicide, intoxication, psychosis, or inter-cultural tensions, as in my recent (March 2017) re-telling of the Orestes justice drama, chalked out on the Yuendumu basketball court for an audience of youth workers and the Warlpiri justice mediation group. Some have been more complex community theatre performance events – such as *The Sugarman/Dionysos* series that ranged over seven years (1993-2000) and different locations.

Overall, the main mythical stories that I have engaged with include variations on themes of The Passion of Christ, (in a church in Paddington), the Sufi classic *Majnun and Laila*, *Don Quixote* (in Meherabad, India). Family, community nativity or biblical themes, e.g a stormy re-enactment of Noah's Ark on a Hawkesbury River beach, and a 'crossing of the Red Sea' in a river bed for an Alice Springs Passover event. *Gilgamesh*, *Isis/Osiris* and *Inanna*, in various settings, including in collaboration with Diane Wolkstein at Lake George, Canberra. *Oedipus*, (as a stolen generation story at Nepean College). Social Ecology camp events - at Hamilton Downs, NT and a Blue Mountains site. Bush camp variations on primal Greek origin stories leading into the *Cronos/Crow/Sugarman/Dionysos/Bacchae* series (Central Australia), *Orpheus* in Alice Springs, the *Persephone/Demeter* variations and, most recently, *Electra*, derived from Aeschylus' *Orestia* and stimulated by Kieran Finnane's 2016 book *Trouble – On Trial in Central Australia*.³

There may be more that I have forgotten. Most are Mediterranean Grecian/Middle Eastern mythic in origin. This is because in such stories the sense of theatre and family drama is so dramatic, so psychologically exacting, so rooted in archetypal foundations and so resonant with the subtle complications. These are the emotional psychodramas of western civilisation, the histories of failings, tragic and comic, and at the same time, poetic exemplars of the regeneration of spirit and peoples - no matter what the devastation.

Such mythic tales are packed with organic human history and engagements with the nature of being alive or dead amid turbulent natural forces. Origin dramas take place in the context of hunting, gathering, growing food, protecting land, making love and war, confronting death and dying. The themes evoke jealousy, envy, betrayal, retribution, reconciliation and going on being ... Primal anxieties, hopes and fears are embedded in our heritage of ancient tales that reveal the psychopathology and the curative good sense of human nature. Loss of consciousness of such vital cultural threads of long-time human experience might be a problem in our new and foundering Australian cultures. (The cinematic cult of Superheroes seems to me a perversion of the mythic histories; a cancerous manifestation of sociopathic, paranoid/schizoid adrenalin thinking, a manifestation of psychotic metaphysics,⁴ but I won't go there.)

The nicest place to remember/recollect our psychic histories is by being on the sites where the original events took place. One can still do this by visiting the European/Middle Eastern sacred sites. Yet for an Australian with a localised sensibility there is an extra delicate task of discovering, opening oneself and negotiating with authentic onto poetic potentials within the Australian country. The Australian country is imbued with indigenous spirit.

Because I live in Central Australia some of the events have been performed within indigenous settings with indigenous collaborations; and under the influence of, or cognizant of the way local ceremony is managed, and performed. I consider this recognition and participation with specific indigenous family and stories to be a crucial and essential element in my cultural engagement. I constantly think about how to set up a community event that has qualities of ceremony, is aware of indigenous presence at many levels of being, attends to pragmatic protocol and undertakes the hazard ... because being here means I must recognise and integrate, little bit by little bit – and that process is hazardous and tiring.

Performance in a theatre or a film tends to be controlled with an intended or fixed outcome; if people get excited it is because the drama, the action, the performers and the entire composition works with a particular alchemy that can be thrilling, chilling and transformative. Ontopoetic theatre on site has an added priority, which is to be responsive and attentive to the spirit of the place and allow that 'spirit' to join in the show. The formulae of onto poetic composition is, therefore, of a different order to conventional theatre. I will say a little on three essential elements in that 'formula' – Story, Set and Setting.

The Story

The story must have within it a mythic basis or a mythic stream. This implies the theme and characters, the narrative style, musicology, iconography and natural setting is of an archetypal nature, ('archetypal' simply meaning – 'of an original form'). I prefer the theme to be clearly emanating from a cultural ancestry that is relevant to participants, even if most of us have forgotten or eschewed our cultural ancestry.

This means that the audience/participants can, if they wish, follow the story thread back in time – as in 'the unbroken thread' referred to by Ovid in the first lines of his *Metamorphoses* – to recover themes and events embedded in the foundation of culture relevant to our origins, ancestry and traditions. There is strength in this. It means something unexpected (ontopoetic) can emerge out of ancestral psychic heritage that can bypass contemporary conventions, individualistic or 'politically correct' restrictions and commercial psychic comfort.

Almost all performances of old stories that I have facilitated have been in natural locations, or the outside has been brought into an internal space transformed – as for the 1991 Nepean College (now University of Western Sydney) Aboriginal issues conference where we devised a performance of *Oedipus*. The atrium for the building was transformed with sand and paintings. Specific local indigenous people willingly collaborated, recognising the *Oedipus* theme as a stolen generation tragedy. It became a controversial event.

Often the themes I develop are serious, but I confess that one event I have enjoyed above all was our revision of a Medieval Nativity Play set out beneath Spencer Hill in Alice Springs. A camel wagon (led by our resident Israeli, Ilan Warchiver) arrived with the wise men and heaps of children. Bearded cameleer, Peter Yates, cooked fish and bread, handing out what seemed like five thousand fish, Paul Quinlivan as villainous Herod struck terrified delight among children scattering; Isabelle Kirkbride, as the Mary Madonna played her cello for baby Jesus and local new born infants were brought to her for blessing and tranquillity. The story was well enough known to children and family performers that it didn't need to be tightly scripted or explained and the story could flow among the people with ease. The myth of the Magi arriving with camels from the east and finding the special baby, receiving

blessing and sharing bread and fish could serve us all with participative pleasure, tranquil good humour.

The Set (Attitude)

From an onto-poetic perspective the directors of an event set in a natural location need to establish that the performance may not really be an 'entertainment' and that unexpected incidents may occur, since the story and the setting is open to nature's unreliability. The attitude is that of 'ceremony sensibility'. This is a sensibility that we might learn from Japanese Noh theatre, from Peter Brook's writings and experiments, (for instance *The Mahabharata* and *Orghast in Perseopolis*), from African/ Haitian voodoo, from Shinto, from liturgical drama and charismatic Christian gatherings and so forth. The point being that, in some circumstances, mythic being or circling spirits may 'incarnate' in the collective melee of ceremony or intra-psychically enter an actor or participant. Such an attitude and expectation underpins Aboriginal ceremony, where it is understood that the ceremony will/ may be visited by the ancestral, localised *Jukurrpa* (Dreaming) beings whose story or ceremony is being enacted at that site. The anthropology of ceremony is thus acknowledged but it is not my priority to develop or reference this any further here.

The 'visitations' of which I speak may be delicate and intimate and intra-psychic for this person or that, or dramatically collective, due perhaps to group frenzy or an unexpected wind/fire storm or the arrival of animal at the performance, as happened in the *Ilparpa Persephone* 2015, two eagles circled above at the very moment the narrator spoke of the two eagles meeting above Delphi. Performance in country means that the participants are vulnerable to the passing of a snake, a shift in weather, the naturally glorious presence of stars, moon rising or a clear or troubled night. Perhaps later, perhaps sleeping on site, a participant might be visited by strange dreams, presences or revelations.

As I see it, an attitude (set) of openness to onto-poetic visitations underpins the moment of transubstantiation in the Christian Mass. In the ceremony of the Christian Communion, devoted persons experience the humble bread and wine as transforming spiritually into the body and blood of Christ (as incarnation of the Divine). The devotee subjectively internalises the presence of the living Divine, set within the containment of a sacred space and time. This metamorphosis of ordinary substance into symbolic or divine substance takes place with devotion and love within a ceremonial setting. A sanctified setting, perhaps, that is knowingly or unknowingly continued by those who remember, (unconsciously or intentionally), pre-Christian Mystery ceremonies of Eleusis, Ephesus, Malta, old Sumeria or Egypt. Perhaps Christian liturgies preserve the continuity of transformative ceremony that began millennia ago in ash darkened caves and rock formations of our prehistoric *homo sapien* ancestry.

Knowing that natural forces from within the human and from the exigencies of nature might combine on that particular day or night means that the direction and composition of the performance must make room for such exigency. To do so, and to allow this partnership, is a beautiful thing. The set, the attitude of the composition of performance on site, makes room for an onto-poetic partnership.

Setting

There are a few essential factors to contemplate pragmatically and poetically when creating performance in a natural setting. This includes at least:

- the choice of site
- preparation of site
- negotiation with site
- care of site
- adaptation of the story in terms of what the site can or cannot do
- studying how a site might match archetypal elements of the human story

- appreciating what happens on the site during performance
- the restoration of site after the event
- and acknowledgement and gratitude to spiritual phenomena that may be attached to that site.

This is a big subject and I do not amplify each of these suggested activities here, I am merely suggesting things to think about and discuss with the performance crew.

Frankly, I feel that we (post modern urbanised westerners) are a bit insensitive and gauche about the process of negotiation with a site and its cultural histories. I have seen performances events set up in the central Australian (and other regions) where it seems to me that the site is being used simply (naively) as a backdrop for the performance. Audiences tend to love this ... 'oh we saw the Symphony Orchestra perform against the red cliffs – it was awesome'.

This is ok, I guess, and is part of popular culture, but it doesn't really have the spiritual rigour of a community group engaging psychically with a site and developing the performance out of the grounding of that place - as well as from their own activated imagination and adaptation of a cultural /mythic force.

In *Persephone's Dog*, set in Ilparpa Quarry, the underlying historical reference was to an early phase in the life of human tribes, perhaps during an ice age, 7,000 years or so years ago. It would seem that at such times desperate people were leaving hunting and gathering. Suffering glaciations, predation and long migratory walks seeking food some groups settled. Intentional yet arduous cultivation began. The Demeter story reflects that transition. Demeter's search for her lost daughter and her grievous rage at Kore's disappearance distils into the story some of the cultural anxieties that must have pervaded the lives of people in those times. The anxieties are gathered up in a story told and retold and enacted in ceremonies.

For this reason we set the primal mother's primal loss story upon an exposed, dramatic, but, also bleak rock shelter of a place, open to the elements. Darkness and fire brought the underworld to the surface and we could sit there in the night, between earth and the underground of death, between famine and hope, between grief and loss. Waiting. Then when Kore/Persephone finally came back and her sisters, in the flickering firelight, danced again the traditional Cretan Labyrinth dance, it was possible for us to be living in time present and time past - and perhaps time future – when drastic changes in climate might yet again swallow up all the young women and the young men. The bleak site was engaged in such a way that it became part of the story.

The most recent event in which I was involved was more gentle and the site worked to gather people from different directions into a potential space. The site was where Olive Pink lived and made a native garden. Her site gathered a diverse community from many directions and languages into poetic tranquillity, a frisson of fires and surprise. This was the 2017 Alice Springs Writer's Festival performance, *Crosslines*, devised with Danni Powell and set in the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens at night. *Crosslines*, begun at sunset, was oriented around a wide circle of stones and fire drums and the four directions laid out on the ground within which and around which the audience sat and ate *alfresco*. The performance was a multicultural gathering of Aboriginal, local and international poet/storytellers speaking in many languages. *Crosslines* worked with the site and the site supported the mood.⁵

Many of the events I devise, in company with others, have a kind of anarchic uncertainty. We make room for prevailing (ontopoetic) winds blowing through the preparation and performance. This is sometimes a cause of anxiety for some of those involved. Frankly I feel we have to manage this uncertainty because nature puts us up against the wall and escapes the human attempt to micro-manage. You can micro-manage a performance in a theatre. You cannot do so upon an open site.

Sometimes openness to environmental conditions has been a bit dangerous, especially where fires are involved, as in the 2015 *Persephone* when clumps of highly flammable buffel grass got a bit excited. Another was in a ceremony performance based

upon *Semele Burning*, from the Dionysos/Sugarman saga where, according to myth, Dionysos' mother is struck by lightning and the infant has to be saved from her burning body.

This event took place at Injartnama Aboriginal Outstation where spinifex grass was gathered in mounds, set in circles around the figure of the mother and child and, as the story progressed, set alight. In the conflagration Johnny Japaljarri Possum (an Anmatjerre man) spontaneously sang into the microphone the most ecstatic traditional song about saving the Possum children. Arrernte men, and others, wove their way through the fires to triumphantly save from immolation the statuesque effigy of the infant child. This was a spontaneous yet prepared for response by those men to the urgency of the need to rescue the child. The underlying existential theme was the loss of young indigenous mothers and their babies through suicide or sexual violence.

In that situation no one worried about insurance liability because the Aboriginal people participating knew how to handle spinifex fire and we were all on our feet anyway, not sitting confined against a rock face in the quarry. I mention these two incidents because the fires, in both cases, were prepared for, but fire is always dangerous and the drama includes being open to manage shifts in the behaviour of the elements. Sometimes such wild moments, as the Possum conflagration, tie in exactly to the meaning and significance of the mythic story being performed. These are what I call 'ontopoetic moments'. In the Ilparpa buffel grass fire outburst the justifiable worry among some of the close by audience was a distraction to the main theme of Persephone's progressive and cautious descent through fires into her underworld. Our fire management should have been better.

There is, of course, tension and uncertainty in remaining open to the site, open to the entry of spirits (in the Shinto and indigenous Australian sense), and at the same time, having regard to safety and the demand to gather and please an audience. In some cases (for this reason) explorations of the conjunction of mythic story and sites have been 'workshop' campouts in bush or beach setting where a specific group worked their way through a story intentionally responsive to the locale, its influences and the 'beat' of the mythic story. Campouts are good for exploring a story in a site because one does not have to be bound by the constraints of performing for an audience. There have been dangerous moments at those events also, some to do with nature (for instance, an inundation by rain on a muddy hill slope near Berry NSW); and some through eruptions of human passion brought on by enacting incidents in the Dionysos myth. Freya Matthews, in *Reinhabiting Reality*⁶ refers to and describes unexpected personal events at the Hamilton Downs, Central Australia camp. So, without going on about this too much, a site is not merely a backdrop or a setting for a concert, a sequence in a movie or the projection of spectacular lights on a mountain range. A site is a phenomenon with whom (or with which) one invites a relationship.

I have, therefore, learned to be very careful in considering the site and the spirit of a place as the possible location for a story. In Central Australia I do this in conversation with local indigenous people, should that be relevant, or with those locals who know the character and history of the likely site. Furthermore there is a kind of 'seeking of permission' from the spirit of the site itself. Seeking permission enhances a mysterious participation between the place, performance and performers that is one of the most subtle delights of telling an old story on a responsive site. In this way site, cliffs, rocks, creatures, shadows, wind, times of day and history all become participants in the drama. The majority of those of us who took part in the Ilparpa *Persephone* felt this, saw this.

There is contention in Central Australia about sacred sites and what can or cannot be performed by non-indigenous people on indigenous lands. This is a serious matter and requires astute, sophisticated, inter cultural negotiation. This is an ethical negotiation that not all production artists are prepared to consider. Commercial invasion of indigenous sites and sensitive personal indigenous mentality by naïve

(excitable) artists and commercial or tourist operations is a concern. It's all about authentic recognition. And an acceptance that:

- Sites and cultural locations always have been neglected, desecrated, exploited and mined in most countries of the world.
- Artists, (some) and philosophers (some) and some country people, nevertheless, keep on coming back to sites, restoring them and bringing cultural stories into being in relationship with places that are in sympathy with human memory, imagination and creativity. This is an onto-poetic partnership devoutly to be nourished.
- Care of sites and reviving story on site is a good thing to do and long may it continue - even though we are exiled or executed.

I will say no more about this. Except that I wish our cultural artists would do more to honour and evoke the spirit of our sacred sites and continue to develop the ceremonies of our shared multicultural spiritual ancestry, here in Australia and in old Europe and the Levant; in Bali, in New Guinea, in Oceania ... wherever the mythic creatures of creation have laid down their feet and made things happen. These are country places of history that are destroyed so blindly by dissociated men wielding axes, knives, suicide vests, missiles, bull dozers and computer keyboards.

Carnac, Elefis, Delphi, Catyl Hyuk, Palmyra, Damascus, Beirut, Jerusalem ... holes in the world though which fall a myriad of beings. And to this list I add thousands upon thousands of sites within Australian country from which emerge a myriad of beings.

So be it.

Notes

¹ Craig San Roque, PhD, lives in Alice Springs. Northern Territory. A psychologist and consultant in Central Australia, his attitude and practice has been influenced by long and pragmatic association with indigenous people in the region. He is a member of the ANZ Society of Jungian Analysts, was involved in the University of Western Sydney Social Ecology project, taught Anthropology and Performance studies and, over 10 years, contributed to the innovative UWS Masters in Analytical Psychology. Special interests are in how cultural complexes determine thinking and action, how mythic story and *tjukurrpa* work, conflicts in law, the ethical management of indigenous projects and the enigma of the future of Central Australia. Much of his published writing is on such themes, including a graphic novel, *The Long Weekend in Alice Springs*, winner of the NT Literary Award, 2013.

² D.W. Winnicott (1971), "Playing and Reality". Tavistock Publications, UK.

³ K.Finnane (2016), *Trouble – On Trial in Central Australia*, UQP. Brisbane.

⁴ E. Rhode (1994), *Psychotic Metaphysics*, Karnac Books, London.

⁵ K.Finnane (2017), review in www.alicespringsnews.com#37D5C6

⁶ F. Matthews (2005) (Hamilton Downs, Chapter 5) in *Reinhabiting Reality*