

Memory

by Pil Hansen and Bruce Barton

Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 145, Winter 2011, pp. 3-5
(Article)

Over the past ten years, the generally accepted understanding of human memory has shifted radically, reflecting popularized articulations of recent advances in the cognitive sciences. These advances are in part a result of new brain imaging technology (MRI) and in part the result of a revived interest in the understandings of memory (established and potential) articulated in phenomenological philosophy and its direct influences (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, James, Bergson). In simple terms, the mentioned shift is from memory understood as stored experiences, episodes, and knowledge from the past that can be recalled (as memories of the past) to the much more complex understanding that memory is embodied and neural processes of perception that are recycled and changed implicitly when perceiving in the present. While the relationship between cultural memory and theatre has been addressed extensively—by Canadian scholarship in particular—questions of how the dynamics and *mechanics* of memory inform and act on creative strategies in Canadian dance, performance, and theatre have rarely been raised.¹ This issue of *CTR* is a response to a junction between this perceived shift in understanding and a growing body of Canadian performance projects that involve artistic questions and strategies of memory. We invited a wide range of artists and scholars to discuss how conceptualizations of memory inform contemporary Canadian performance. Intriguingly, while we received only a small number of academic proposals, we were inundated by enthusiastic responses and pitches from practitioners (so many as to make the selection process a very difficult one). As is evident from our final roster of articles, simplistic and outdated understandings of memory are hugely challenged and split open by practices that are acutely aware of memory as a complex process that affects artists and audiences in multiple ways. When teasing out the routes by which the different contributors approach memory, an exciting network of interconnected themes arises—one that has the power and potential to pry apart questions about how and what performance processes can affect. This evocative network does not have a beginning or centre; our introduction, however, must of necessity choose a point of entry. The understanding that performing *is* memory is most explicitly addressed in Maiko Bae Yamamoto's piece on Theatre Replacement's production-in-process *Dress me up in your love*. Her creative team is challenged by the dilemma that even when delivering unscripted and in-part improvised material, the act of performing repeats and often dilutes discoveries of compelling connections to source material initially made in rehearsal. When this source material, furthermore, is a collection of emotional and personal memories associated with "*Outfits of Significance*" (donated by others or the performers themselves), the layers of repetition and possible dilution multiply. Accepting the act of repeating memory as a condition of performance, but deliberately troubling the notion of presence, Ame Henderson asks how a performer can "be 'in the moment' while also processing what has happened before and [...] projecting towards the moment that has not yet arrived?" One attempt at a solution is found in the "Performance Recipe" of *300 TAPES*, in which Henderson's Public Recordings outlines reusable performance

generating systems and compositional procedures. Another can be discovered in the performer Marie Claire Forté and dramaturge Jacob Zimmer's discussion of *relay*, a dance project of remembering. Both manoeuvres are proposed as modes of resistance to the "get it right" doctrine of public education and the inscriptions of social influences. Approaching a closely related dilemma from a decidedly different perspective, Yvette Nolan evokes Aboriginal cosmology to articulate the creative implications of always bringing into the rehearsal room "all of those who came before, and all of those yet to come." Given that all times exist concurrently in Aboriginal belief systems, a strategy of "forgetting" is not an option; rather, imagination has to be summoned to the task of transforming the place that was, is, and will be—simultaneously. The material decay of the ability to remember is hauntingly present in Marcus Youssef's fittingly fragmented revisit to his mother's writing from the period of her early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Her forced forgetting initially resulted in poetic gaps of imagination; however, Youssef's deeply personal account inevitably stumbles at the stage of the disease where she could no longer remember her "self," transforming the lyrical nature of her—and his—"compositions." Completing what Youssef perhaps will continue doing for his mother, Marie Brassard brings onto the stage her younger self sending messages to herself in the future, messages that lead the mature Brassard to bring her younger self onto the stage. Materializing a more individually centred version of the concept of time Nolan writes about, Brassard cares deeply for the selves—fictional or remembered in other ways—that she brings onto the stage and expresses concern about the ways in which her creative choices can undo their past and remove their future. Youssef's and Brassard's concerns resonate strongly with those enacted in Wells and Barton's *Swimmer (68)*—a detailed performance text from a work-in-progress. The centrality of memory in the anything-but-simple task of sustaining self-continuity provides the form and content of this solo devised performance. In its examination of the fraught relationship between embodied and mediated experience, *Swimmer (68)* explores memory as the fragile basis of the past *and* the future *in* the present. Hansen argues that when memories, which contribute to the performer's sense of self, are invested in a collective process of embodiment and transformation, something that initially provided the individual with self-continuity is rendered collective. In Public Recordings' projects, the performers participate voluntarily and collaboratively while registering how they are affected by this recycling of their memories. However, in projects where the collaboration—at times even the volunteering—of the people whose memories are used does not figure into the process, the ethical considerations raised by Brassard re-emerge in challenging ways. James Long's "Letter to the People of Tennessee" is a courageous (and sly) gesture of explanation and apology to the American people whose words make up the majority of the often provocative verbatim text in a recent Theatre Replacement production. Memories are approached in the form of words that have been set loose to act on their own or get captured, cut up, and also directed by Henderson. In these projects, Henderson and her collaborators devise performance strategies of retelling personal stories or remembering movements danced in the past based in the understanding that the act of remembering is "a function mostly of our imaginations." When Henderson connects this understanding with "the impossibility of repetition in spite of our best efforts," her position resonates directly with the neurobiologist Gerald Edelman's thoughts on the inevitable reconstructive and transformative nature of memory. This and other related points of resonance arise between Hansen's discussion of the cognitive processes

involved in Henderson's recent works and Henderson's sidebar responses to this analysis. In contrast to Henderson's perspective, Evan Webber and Aimée Dawn Robinson argue, each in their own way, that memory (ancestral, cultural, educational) conditions the performer to repeat learned behaviour. For his part, Webber suggests that, historically, "theatre may be seen as condemned, as it were, to be a teacher of the conditions of memory's authority," and he proposes an avenue out of this bind that re-examines the nature of *mistakes* in composition and performance. Robinson, meanwhile, describes a set of performance strategies which focus on "memory lapse and collapse, forgetfulness, and repetition" as a way to create small "physical and metaphysical openings" and redirect the process wrestled into radically altered expressions and contexts. The process exposes the enduring tension, even in alternative and experimental performance, between ethical responsibility to verbatim sources and the "proven theatrical values that make for good entertainment."

Andrew Houston's contribution explores a similar topic by contesting accepted, largely authoritarian interpretations of "the archive." Site-specific theatre's ability to recontextualize individuals and environments, Houston suggests, encourages audiences to "*re-spect* . . . to literally look again" at "forgotten" lives and living spaces. In Houston's case study, the explicit framing of verbatim texts, photographs, personal belongings, and communal spaces exposes memory as a present and ethically complicit act for performers and spectators alike.

Forté and Zimmer also address the concept of archive, but unlike the fixed material environments and artefacts that Houston discusses, Forté and Zimmer explore the dynamic archive of a performer's body. Shifting the focus from strategies of reassessment and reinterpretation to strategies of adaptation and transformation, this orientation results, for Forté, in the experience that "[t]he memory is not in the presence, it is in the future. And in the future, I don't remember what happened yet." Of course, the understanding of theatrical composition as an act of creative autobiography is hardly new, particularly when it comes to playwrights. However, increasingly complex models of memory invite (necessitate?) correspondingly complex applications of this dynamic.

Sky Gilbert's contribution proposes that the investment of select autobiographical memory in dramatic characters and situations, far from over-specifying or trivializing them, is both a vital means of giving voice to under-represented cultural minorities *and* a common practice throughout the history of Western literature. P.K.Brask pursues a related theme in his analysis of a dramatic *oeuvre* that imparts a thorough sense of verisimilitude to its characters directly through representations of dense, contentious, flawed and selective operations of memory in the pursuit of individual identity. The relationship between memory and identity, in this case in the context of intercultural relations, is also the focus of Roberta Barker's essay on Halifax's OneLight Theatre company. The added factor in this piece is the use of digital media as an integral component of the staged representations and a means of making explicit the gaps—at times *chasms*—between the workings of personal and cultural memory. Here Barker's observations specifically intersect with Wells and Barton's, whose solo character/performer is both figuratively and literally stranded in the gap between partial individual memory and overwhelming cultural inundation. However, weaving back into our initial entry into this network of intersecting ideas, *Swimmer* (68) also proposes that performing *is* memory—or rather, in this case, performing is a desperate assertion of memory, embodied and inherited, as a means of self-survival.

The interconnecting themes we have drawn your attention to in the brief space allotted to this introduction reflect only a few among the many routes of discovery that the pieces included in this issue invite our readers to explore. These avenues offer inspiration to imagine what both artistic and scholarly exploration of memory in theatre, performance, and dance can lead to in terms of creative strategies and understandings of how performance *acts*.

Note

¹ Research into theatre, performance, and cognitive studies has had significant representation at the annual conferences of the American associations ASTR and ATHE over the past eight years. Recent and forthcoming book-length studies by Hansen's research colleagues and collaborators Rhonda Blair, John Lutterbie, and Bruce McConachie as well as large sections dedicated to the field in *Theatre Journal*, *The Drama Review*, and *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* offer useful insights into this new field of research and artistic inquiry. Over the same eight years, the related, but more interdisciplinary, field of Neuro-aesthetics has been established with dedicated research centres and networks in the European context.