CIRCUS IN THE CEMETERY: TRANSFORMING SPACE AND UNEARTHING MEMORY IN VULCANA WOMEN’S CIRCUS PERFORMANCE, GRAVE EFFECTS OF NOTABLE WOMEN

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A woman in her wedding gown jumps from a bridge. A baby rises from its tiny coffin to be comforted by the sexton. An alcoholic priest with an Irish accent runs around with her cassock stuck in her knickers. A vampire tap dances on a grave.

On 5 October 2011, Vulcana Women’s Circus staged Grave Effects of Notable Women, a site-specific physical theatre show set in the Toowong Cemetery in Brisbane. The performance had a five-day run, with two shows every evening for the first four days, and a matinee performance on the last. Grave Effects emerged out of a two-year research and creative development period with the Friends of the Toowong Cemetery (FTC), a voluntary organisation of people with a special interest in the cemetery. It was also the first full-scale performance that Vulcana had put on in two years, since their previous performance, Slingbacks, High Heels and Sensible Shoes, a show that was created and performed with Deaf Women at the Judith Wright Centre. Since its formation in 1995, Vulcana has developed a strong working relationship with women in different communities; based in the Stores Building of the Brisbane Powerhouse, the group’s philosophy stems from traditions of inclusiveness, seeking to create a safe space for women — particularly vulnerable and marginalised women — to express themselves creatively, and to explore their physical potential.¹

The driving force behind Grave Effects, then, seems to fall in line with Vulcana’s vision
of empowering and celebrating women. The performance, under the artistic direction of Veronica Neave, sets up to ‘unearth the forgotten stories of our tireless female forebears who worked so hard to gain the rights that we enjoy today’. In effect, the performance brings to life — through non-linear and non-literal modes of storytelling — the famous, infamous and forgotten women who are buried at the Toowong Cemetery; these women include women’s rights and labour activist, Emma Miller, suffragist and feminist writer Leontine Cooper, and even Lily the Vampire, who is said to wander 13th Avenue of the Toowong Cemetery.

Grave Effects is a perambulatory performance that begins with shadow puppetry, telling a brief story of a tired gravedigger working in the cemetery. The audience gathers near the scene, holding onto a rose stalk that they have been given just prior to the show’s commencement. The reverie created by the shadow puppetry gets broken by a loud car horn bleating in the distance. The sound gets louder as the car approaches and screeches to a halt; from the passenger side, a priest rushes out and, in an Irish accent, hurriedly informs the audience of the proceedings of the funeral; most importantly, the audience is there to pay their final respects to Leontine Cooper. As the journey to locate Leontine’s ‘grave’ is made, the audience encounters numerous vignettes that include aerial acts, puppetry, music and acrobatics. Several characters noted in Brisbane’s history are revealed to the audience throughout the show, such as Leontine Cooper, Emma Miller and Lillian Violet Cooper. The priest finally locates Leontine’s ‘grave’, with the help of the sexton, and the audience once again comes across all the other characters in the performance, who have already gathered around Leontine’s ‘coffin’ and are singing a funeral hymn as the audience and priest approach. Just as the priest is finishing the last rites, the same car that first delivered her to the site comes rushing in, with Madonna’s Like a Virgin blasting from the speakers. The priest loses her Irish accent and apologises for having to rush off to a Bar Mitzvah. When she is gone, the characters continue humming the funeral hymn as they place their own rose stalks into the coffin, and the audience follows suit.

What follows in this article is my discussion of Grave Effects in light of ideas on space, memory and identity. I examine how the performance attempts not only to re-imagine the landscape of Brisbane’s largest cemetery, but also how it unveils memories and recreates the identities of the various significant women buried there through physical storytelling and the provocative media of acrobatics, puppetry and aerial acts. What happens, I ask, when performance-makers challenge the notions of ‘sacredness’ that are often associated with cemeteries? In a space filled with ghosts of the past, I further ask how Grave Effects invites the audience to (re)consider their own role within the real and imagined space of a performance that aims to dissect the notions of life and death, a performance that is at times hauntingly serious and, at others, completely irreverent.
THE USE AND TRANSFORMATION OF SPACE IN GRAVE EFFECTS

Marvin Carlson writes that the village cemetery is ‘the most haunted of all sites’. Cemeteries are not just haunted by notions of the supernatural; they are ‘haunted’ by their historical, cultural and spiritual associations, and ‘haunted’ indeed by the stories of the people buried there. Further, the idea of the ‘haunting’ of a space, particularly a theatrical space, relates to Carlson’s own concept of ‘ghosting’, which is essentially a recognition of the past and the operations of memory in the theatre. The Toowong Cemetery, with a history of over a century, is ‘haunted’ undoubtedly by numerous ‘ghostings’: official ghost tours share tales of haunted graves with participants; the FTC conducts various heritage walking trails; vandals have left a path of destruction after damaging over eighty graves. Through these acts/activities, the Toowong Cemetery undergoes various transformations; while the site itself remains relatively the same, we recall the different stories/memories associated with each transformation.

Staging a circus performance in the Toowong Cemetery forces the space to be transformed yet again, and in turn, makes the audience (re)consider its role within the space. When the performance first begins, the role of the audience appears to be just that — spectators watching a performance that they have paid for. It is perhaps not until about six minutes into the show that another purpose emerges more clearly: the audience, from being mere strangers in a process of viewing, are called to be active participants in a process of remembering. The audience is told by the ‘priest’ — their guide in both the physical and spiritual sense — that they have gathered there to locate the grave of Leontine Cooper, in order that she can finally be laid to rest. This journey, of locating the grave, performing the funeral rites, and finally placing the rose stalks into Leontine’s ‘coffin’, thus forms the basic structure of the performance. It is important also to consider how the physical journey undertaken by the audience impacts upon the performance. When writing about site-specific performance, Luis Carlos Sotelo acknowledges Michel de Certeau’s view that ‘by walking, space is being practised’. Thus, through this journey on foot, the landscape itself becomes an agent of signification and meaning-making within the performance; the architecture of the cemetery, and the inactivity of the gravestones and monuments located within it, become transformed by the physicality of both the performers and the audience.

Focusing on the concept of space, it would be useful to consider Fiona Wilkie’s view that ‘the place has to matter to the performance’. This idea is important because it is difficult to imagine Grave Effects being staged anywhere else. The Toowong Cemetery is fundamental to the stories being told in the performance, and as such, speaks to the notion of the space’s being a ‘container of memory’. Indeed, the cemetery, and the graves that the spectators come upon, contain, both literally and figuratively, the notable women and their stories and memories. It then becomes a question of which stories the
performance chooses to tell, and how it chooses to tell them – something which I explore later in this article.

Pursuing further Wilkie’s writings on space, she highlights certain categories of rules relating to site-specific performance. The four that she mentions are:

1 rules relating to physical barriers, which can be man-made or natural, that restrict and channel movement;
2 explicit rules stated by the controllers of the site;
3 borrowed codes that are brought to bear on particular types of place;
4 implicit conventions that work to affect and organise behaviour through communal agreement.

In terms of applying these rules in relation to *Grave Effects*, I propose that they can be understood as:

1 the fence and gates that surround the Toowong Cemetery;
2 ‘Do not unlawfully interfere with graves’;
3 behaving in a ‘respectful’ manner within the cemetery;
4 keeping to the footpaths in the cemetery, or at least following the paths made by the performers.

So, even while ‘transforming’ the space of the Toowong Cemetery, or as Richard Schechner describes it, ‘writing on the space’, there are particular rules and modes of behaviour which one associates with a cemetery, stemming from personal and cultural memories and understanding about the space. For instance, if an audience member was not able to see part of the performance because someone was blocking them, they would not climb on top of a tombstone in order to get a better view; neither would they walk over the graves to get ahead of other spectators. Implicitly, an audience associates cemeteries with notions of sacredness, a final resting place for the body. Therefore, in the performance, when Lily the Vampire tap dances on a ‘grave’, or when performers execute acrobatic feats on one (see Figures 1 and 2), the audience understands and is aware of these ‘spatial rules’, that these ‘graves’ are make-believe, constructed specifically for the purpose of the performance. Other people, however, those outside the shared experience of performer and spectator, may not be quite as aware of the performance’s negotiations with space. On one occasion, a member of the public called the Emergency Response Unit after seeing some women ‘desecrating’ a ‘grave’ by dancing on it. The Emergency Response Unit was very understanding after the performers explained that they were rehearsing for a performance approved by the Brisbane City Council. Another gentleman
reacted to the idea of a circus performance in the cemetery thus:

Completely unacceptable behaviour. It demeans the memory of those buried on consecrated ground and goes against usual human norms of behaviour and respect for the deceased. Come on Brisbane City Council, stop this nonsense. Let the circus people find somewhere else for their show.¹⁰

Such adverse responses towards the performance — or even the idea of the performance — could partly be attributed to a collective awareness of the cemetery as ‘sacred’ site, suggesting that a space like the cemetery should not be contested. On the contrary, space in site-specific performance is always contested, be it in a shopping centre, an abandoned warehouse or even a cemetery. It is possible to consider the contestation of space in terms of going beyond, as Wilkie suggests, the ‘mere binary of “breaking” and “keeping” spatial rules’, in order to allow for more elasticity.¹¹ It is important, also, to situate Vulcana’s own view of the chosen space, one that they claim to have an ‘organic respectfulness of’.¹² As such, performers do not dance on real graves, but they do bend and test spatial rules by performing acts not commonly associated with cemeteries: dangling from trees, and jamming to a loud rock tune in the middle of the cemetery. In doing so, such transgressive acts experiment with and renegotiate the implied and explicit codes of the cemetery.

So far, Wilkie’s ideas on space have been useful in my consideration of Vulcana’s performance in terms of spatial rules and modes of behaviour within them. I am intrigued further by the idea of cemeteries as rhetorical spaces, as discussed by Elizabethada Wright in her article titled ‘Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places’. Wright acknowledges the centuries-old connections between space, memory and rhetoric, pointing out the ‘importance of materiality on memory’,¹³ that ‘[a] memory must have a place where a memory can crystalize and secrete itself’.¹⁴ If one were to accept this association between materiality and memory, it is then possible to see how Grave Effects attempts to challenge not only concepts of the cemetery as sacred space, but also what can be considered ‘official’ history; that is, what has been remembered and recorded about these women through written (historical) documentation.

Returning to the idea of the cemetery as a rhetorical space, Wright argues that cemeteries are often considered to be a ‘feminine’ rhetorical space, largely because of their traditional associations with mourning, which itself is seen within the ‘female’ domain.¹⁵ In addition, cemeteries are often seen as ‘quiet resting places that are very stable’,¹⁶ a kind of ‘utopia’ free of contestation.¹⁷ However, as Michel Foucault admits, the cemetery is a kind of heterotopia; it is something that is ‘able to juxtapose, in a single space, several spaces that are themselves incompatible’.¹⁸ The cemetery, seen as a heterotopia, is therefore not stable or static; it is a site upon which inversion can
occur, a ‘powerful location for [unearthing] forgotten memory’. As a heterotopian rhetorical space, as Wright suggests, the cemetery contains ‘thousands upon thousands of voices clamouring to be heard, a cacophony of remembrances … calling out’. I wish to highlight how Grave Effects carries this idea of a ‘cacophony of remembrances calling out’ to an almost ridiculous extreme. In what could be considered the final scene in the performance – the eventual locating of Leontine Cooper’s grave and subsequent memorial – the priest, along with all the other characters that the audience has encountered in the performance, leads the audience in the funeral rites in order to farewell Leontine (see Figure 3). In singing praises to the most ‘Holy Moly Saviour’ and ‘ponder[ing] if the Hokey Pokey is really what it’s all about’, the notion of cemetery as heterotopian rhetorical space becomes articulated and emphasised by this complete irreverence of the sacred.
THE IMPORTANCE OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY

So, by activating the space, challenging accepted modes of behaviour in the Toowong Cemetery, and giving a sense of materiality to the stories of the women buried there, the performance invites the audience to engage in the act of remembering, and that is why the liveness of theatre is paramount; the idea of liveness is critical because while ‘memory relates to the past, … remembering happens in the present’. \(^{22}\) Grave Effects establishes that the audience is an essential component in the unearthing of these forgotten stories by stating at the start of the performance that the final death of a person is ‘that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time’. \(^{23}\) The audience, by its physical presence, allows for the names of these women to be spoken, thereby retrieving buried memories.

But remembering happens not only in the audience, whose members draw upon their own memories of funerals, cemeteries and previous theatre performances, in order to make meaning in the performance. Remembering also takes place in the characters themselves. The act of remembering, on the one hand, points to the idea of recalling something. On the other, it is a process of re-membering, of piecing and putting back together. In order for some of the characters to remember their stories, they need to fill in the gaps in forgotten moments and in lapses in memory. In one scene, where the audience is led to a candle-lit gazebo, the character Miriam McKenzie tries to remember her own death, a result of shooting herself in order to garner sympathy for her husband convicted of embezzlement. She needs to remember in order to re-member her identity. In this effort, Miriam is helped by Leontine Cooper, whom she meets in Limbo. In the scene, Leontine reads aloud Miriam’s suicide letter to the police: ‘I shall die by my own hand tomorrow morning. I can be of no further assistance to my husband, and so feel I have nothing to live for.’ \(^{24}\) As Miriam joins in this recitation of her history, Leontine steers Miriam onto a path of remembering and reconstruction.

This idea is repeated through Lizzie Langlands, who was reported to have drowned herself in the Brisbane River in 1876 following a cryptic message to her husband. Lizzie struggles with her identity because she is unable to make the connection between the story she is telling about the body of a woman who had drowned herself, and her own personal experience; her memory thus becomes dissociated from her body/identity. Lizzie wanders the cemetery in a daze; in her struggle to remember and thus make sense of what is happening, the sexton retells Lizzie’s memory to her, in a similar way to how Leontine helps Miriam. However, the sexton makes an adjustment to history by telling Lizzie: ‘You didn’t go to the Brisbane River. You came here to see your husband. You tripped and fell.’ \(^{25}\) When Lizzie repeats the sexton’s words as ‘I tripped and fell’, the memory of Lizzie Langlands gets written upon and becomes changed, different from that which has been accepted as common memory; that is, one that has been recorded in archives and subsequently ‘buried’.
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MAIN IMAGE. FIGURE 4. AERIALIST LILY AMOROUS PERFORMS ON A LYRA RIGGED TO A TREE. PHOTO: JEN DAINER, COURTESY VULCANA WOMEN’S CIRCUS.

TOP: FIGURE 5. EMMA MILLER (NIRVANA PILKINGTON) CARRIES ANOTHER WOMAN (KATE THERKELSEN) ON HER SHOULDERS. PHOTO: PANDORA KARAVAN, COURTESY VULCANA WOMEN’S CIRCUS.

ABOVE: FIGURE 6. NIRVANA PILKINGTON BEARS THE WEIGHT OF KATE THERKELSEN AND SALLY STROBRIDGE ON HER HIPS AND THIGHS. PHOTO: PANDORA KARAVAN, COURTESY VULCANA WOMEN’S CIRCUS.
Through what the performance has done, memory – as well as space – is seen as something unfixed; both are always in the process of becoming. If memory – as I have highlighted through the examples of Miriam McKenzie and Lizzie Langlands – is considered ‘essential for the creation of identity’, one cannot ignore how the role of the physical body is also important in establishing and challenging notions of identity. So far, I have discussed how the materiality of the performance – the presence of the physical body, especially the physical female body – contributes to the transformation of space and the exploration of memory. The physical bodies – specifically, the trained, muscular bodies of circus performers – defy what Peta Tait describes as ‘prevailing social patterns of bodily restraint’. Therefore, the staging of risky aerial performances in *Grave Effects* serves a purpose beyond mere theatrics; when a female aerialist hangs and swings from a lyra (aerial hoop), the audience’s awareness of the possibilities of female muscular power is heightened (see Figure 4).

The concept of resisting bodily restraints is taken further through strongwoman acts in the performance. When the audience comes across the monument of Emma Miller and her corresponding ‘grave’, three performers emerge from it, and proceed to execute a series of acro-balances. Acro-balance entails using performers’ body weight to create various formations while balancing on one another; it requires strong body awareness, not only of oneself but of the other person(s), and a keen sense of communication between participants. In using these acts, *Grave Effects* creates and promotes a kind of female physicality and ‘bodily control that defie[s] all precepts of gender submissiveness’. The muscular power of the female Vulcana performer – that is, one that forges its own sense of identity by breaking social taboos – can be paralleled with the women whose own work in the past fought to create identities of women, and whose identities are now being (re)configured in the performance. It is here that one can see how identity can be interrogated and engaged with by ‘thinking through the past in terms of where [we] find [ourselves] in the present …’. Emma Miller, who figuratively carried other women on her shoulders through her championing for women’s rights and equal opportunities, is resurrected in *Grave Effects* in the form of strongwoman Nirvana Pilkington, who literally carries other women on her shoulders. And on her hips. And on her thighs (see Figures 5 and 6).

CONCLUSION

The connection between these notable women, past and present – the homage that Vulcana sought to pay to these women through the performance – can best be contemplated through a quotation from Virginia Woolf, who writes:

*We cannot understand the present if we isolate it from the past. If we want to understand what it is that [we] are doing now … [w]e must forget that*
we are, for the moment, ourselves. We must become the people that we were two or three generations ago. Let us be our great grandmothers.31

By ‘becoming’ these women, the performance seeks to validate their experience, but it also brings with it a touch of epigonism, a certain sense of anxiety and ‘inadequacy’ that Neave felt while reading about their lives.

In staging Grave Effects, it also becomes a question of selection: whose stories to tell? While it may seem rather predictable to stage the stories of prominent women such as Emma Miller, Leontine Cooper, and Queensland’s first female doctor, Lillian Violet Cooper, the performance gives sight and voice to the more marginalised and ‘silenced’ women/characters as well: Vampire Lily, demonised in folklore, becomes humanised as a juggling, tap-dancing, all-round entertainer who merely wants to make human contact; the babies in history who were buried without proper funeral rites are ‘resurrected’ from the soil as hand puppets and given visibility in the performance (see Figure 7). But the extent of this selection and representation in performance is limited by an adherence to ‘official’ regulations. If the aim of Vulcana — and hence Grave Effects — seeks to redress the marginalisation of women in history,32 then it should, as Tracy Davis argues, ‘address the censoring impulse [and] validate the experience’, not merely ‘recreate and document hitherto “lost” women’.33 In making this claim, I am not suggesting that Grave Effects merely recreates and documents these ‘lost’ women; certainly, the performance experiments with possibilities of showing and viewing, and thus, in choosing which stories to tell, and the ways in which they are told, Grave Effects attempts to shift the workings of memory through a combination of historical documentation and artistic (re)
interpretation. The problem with working within such a regulated space as the Toowong Cemetery, however, is the very issue of censorship that Davis warns of; while it may well work to suppress the censoring impulse during the creative development period of the show, having external regulators involved in the process curtails the full extent of what could possibly be shown ‘on stage’.

Despite these difficulties, I argue that the circus medium, particularly the Women’s circus, lends itself to the aesthetic and rhetoric of the cemetery. As a space not closed off to the experiences and memories of women, the cemetery speaks to the idea of inclusiveness that is celebrated in the Women’s circus. Further, as I have elaborated earlier, the cemetery is a heterotopia, thereby allowing for an inversion and a contestation of ideals to occur. If the cemetery as a heterotopian rhetorical space is able to rethink and contest the ideals consistent with femininity, it is useful to consider how the circus, too, can ‘manipulate cultural beliefs about nature, physicality and freedom’ specifically, the demonstration of muscular power defies preconceived cultural notions about the female form.

The body and space are an unfinished process; likewise, so is memory. Just as memory itself is often non-linear, the shape and structure of Grave Effects reflect a similar sense of fragmentation, of different memories operating simultaneously. Even while the audience is taken on a journey, to locate Leontine Cooper’s grave, this is often indirect and spectators find themselves in a state of ‘directionlessness’: their ‘guide’, the priest, needs guidance herself — in the form of maps, a name-calling GPS, a divining rod, and even a phone call from ‘God’. Still, the performance works on a multi-layered exploration of space, memory and identity, revealing and reinventing the ‘ghostings’ of the history of these notable women; Grave Effects speaks to Bert O. States’ idea that in order to be remembered, ‘something must happen again in a different way and will surely happen again in the future in still another way’. This notion of happening again in the future is all the more interesting considering that Vulcana has been asked to restage Grave Effects; how will memory, space and identity be reworked then, and to what effect? To conclude, I finish with a quotation from Heiner Müller, one that I feel is particularly apt for Grave Effects: ‘Our work is raising the dead; the theatre troupe is recruited from ghosts … the set a travel guide through the landscapes beyond death’.

NOTES

1 I am very grateful to the women of Vulcana, who have been extremely open and giving — providing me with project plans, photographs and videos, and especially to Veronica (Ronnie) Neave, for granting me interview after interview and sharing with me Vulcana’s history, vision and philosophy.
2 Vulcana Women’s Circus, Grave Effects of Notable Women Program (Brisbane: Vulcana Women’s Circus, 2011).
was-for-satanists-court-hears-20100413-s6fy.html (viewed 30 July 2012).


7 Ibid 107.


11 Wilkie, ‘Out of Place’ 252.


14 Ibid 55.

15 Ibid 58.

16 Ibid.

17 This argument is raised in Wright’s article, where she bases her definition of ‘utopia’ on Ralf Dahrendorf’s: one that maintains spatio-temporal stability and uniformity.

18 Wright, ‘Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places’ 54.

19 Ibid 60.

20 Ibid.


23 Grave Effects of Notable Women.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Barnes 37.


28 Please note that the ‘grave’ mentioned here was merely a rostrum constructed for the performance. The actual grave of Emma Miller is located on the other side of the cemetery from where the performance was staged.

29 Tait 40.

30 Barnes 41.


32 This statement was included as part of the Grave Effects project plan.


34 See Wright, ‘Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places’. She argues that unlike ‘inappropriate’ memory spaces such as Mount Rushmore, where the monuments of women will not be taken seriously, cemeteries can be seen as ‘appropriate’ rhetorical spaces for women.

35 Tait 6.
