

In Memoriam: Professor Mike Pearson

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Mike Pearson, who has died aged 72, was a world-renowned theatre-maker and academic, whose work transformed the landscape of contemporary theatre and performance. Over the course of a remarkably generative and influential career, Mike made a leading contribution to the development of a range of intersecting fields: the creation of laboratory theatre practices; site-specific performance; the interrogation of the relationship between theatre and archaeology, performance and place; the advancement of performance design; and the establishment of performance studies.

With typical humility and generosity, Mike would have downplayed the authorial logic of these claims, highlighting instead the importance of collaboration and dialogical exchange in the development of his creative practice and critical thinking. For Mike, collaboration was not only central to making theatre happen, it was the essential fabric of performance and the very stuff of everyday life: here we are together, so let's make this interesting (where *inter-esse* precisely invokes the time and place of being-together). Mike always made things seem interesting and important. He had a great feeling for the contemporary as the space of our being together, and of our co-existence in and with time; and for the trace of the historical as the marking of time. Archaeologist Michael Shanks, one of his key co-authors and co-creators, has noted that the recognition of 'our collaborative, collective capacity to make a difference' was at the heart of Mike's conception of agency as emerging not from the pursuit of heroic solo narratives but from the intersubjective, relational process of 'listening and attending' to a multiplicity of voices and lived histories (2022: 14). For Mike, co-appearance was always the (ontologically theatrical) condition of appearance and narration: to tell someone's story is necessarily to tell a story of others, of the networks of relations and contexts through which they appeared to one another, materializing through the traces of their inter-action and co-presence the reality of 'unrepeatable uniqueness' (Cavarero 2000: 134).

Mike's performance-making was saturated by a deep-seated awareness of the inter-relationship between people and place, landscape and culture. He was born in Scunthorpe, Lincolnshire, in 1949, to Sheila (nee Shaw), a school cook, and James Pearson, who worked as a fieldsman for the Potato Marketing Board, and raised in the nearby village of Hibaldstow, where his grandparents ran a fish and chip shop. Mike explored his relationship to the village and its people in his autoethnographic performance, *Bubbling Tom* (2000), drawing on DJ Williams' (1961) notion of *y filltir sqwâr*—'the square mile of childhood'—to account for the lived experience of place and its inter-animation with memory. His sense of performance-making as a topographical and non-representational, meandering 'through time and across land', was expounded fully in his evocative book, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory, and Landscape* (2007, 16). He further explored the performative 'emptiness' of his native North Lincolnshire in *Carrlands* (2007) and *Warplands* (2011, with composer John Hardy, at the Royal Geographical Society), investigating the resonance of landscape as a 'matrix of related stories', sounds, and senses (2007, 17).

Mike also examined the urban landscape and lived history of his adopted home city, Cardiff, in his early works with Mike Brookes, including *Polis* (2001), *Carrying Lyn* (2001), and *Rain Dogs* (with Ed Thomas, 2002), and many other subsequent performances. His concern throughout was to explicate the intersections of public and private space, and the interconnectedness of historical events to the micro-historical experience of lived relations and relationships to place. For example, in *Things Come Apart* (2018, at Tabernacle Baptist Church, with Mike Brookes for National Theatre Wales), Mike examined the Cardiff 'Race Riots' of June 1919, piecing together from local newspapers a 'day-by-day, hour-by-hour, scene-by scene narrative to conjure people, places and incidents' (Pearson 2018) and mapping these onto the geography of the city. The construction of performance topography inter-relating people, place, and politics was Mike Pearson's signature methodology, clearly documented in his book, *Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City* (2013).

Mike studied for a BA in Archaeology (1968—71) and an MA in Education (1971—73) at University College Cardiff (now Cardiff University), and his sense of both disciplines as practices of encounter and engagement with the materiality of the everyday stayed with him throughout his career. His first book, *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001), with Michael Shanks, set out his vision for thinking about performance archaeologically. This foregrounded how the remains and traces of the past could be investigated and reanimated creatively in the time of the present, rearticulating archaeology theatrically as a 'real time event' (Shanks 2022, 3). Likewise, it argued that archaeology's orientation towards things, to the dialectics of presence and absence, enabled a reimagining of the possibilities of theatre as a material practice decoupled from the limits of representation and the dominance of the dramatic text. A later book, *The Mickery Theatre: An Imperfect Archaeology* (2014), applied this archaeological perspective to a specific history of experimental theatre practice, demonstrating beautifully how the lived experience of place, performance, and cultural memory intersect.

Of course, the history of the emergence of experimental theatre was something that Mike himself had very much lived through. He performed with Transitions Trust community arts project (1971—72), trained in Noh theatre in Japan, and developed an early fascination with Antonin Artaud's anti-representational theatre ideas. Mike made his mark as an intensely physical performer with RAT Theatre (1971—72), although this also left its mark on him as he received a cut above the eye performing in the notoriously violent *Blindfold* (1972), the traces of which he later sought to investigate archaeologically (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, 9). Mike went on to co-found Cardiff Laboratory Theatre (1973—80; with David Baird, Siân Thomas and Maria Daly, who were joined in 1975 by Richard Gough). Amongst his key performances was *The Lesson of Anatomy* (1974, a joint project between Cardiff Lab and Théâtre du Double, Paris), a staging of a late text by Artaud in which the idea of 'the body without organs', subsequently developed by Deleuze and Guattari, is articulated as the production and circulation of an energy (maybe even an ecology) beyond the bounds of the physical condition of the body. Yet the challenge of performing it was precisely one of embodiment, of the performer's physical occupation of the space and time of performance so that the elusive energy produced by body and breath might extend beyond the space of the stage and reverberate in the audience. Mike performed *The Lesson of Anatomy* at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, in 1974; repeating it, remarkably, on the same day forty years later in 2014. His virtuosic performance, exemplary in its articulation of how the body in

performance produces theatrical space, provided enduring testimony to Mike's extraordinary capacity to embody, to demonstrate, and to manifest the most profound knowledge of theatre practice (Pearson 2015).

His legacy as a theatre-maker nonetheless resides in the seminal site-specific productions he made as a director and performer with the designer, Cliff McLucas, and the company, Brith Gof (1981—97), which Mike co-founded with Lis Hughes Jones after their departure from Cardiff Lab. *Y Gododdin* (1988, with Test Department at Cardiff's disused Rover Factory); *Pax* (1990, at Harland & Wolff's shipyard, Glasgow, and Aberystwyth railway station); and *Haearn* (1992, at the former British Coal Works in Tredegar) have legendary status in Welsh theatre not only for explicating the landscape of post-Thatcherite deindustrialisation but for the creation of a distinctive approach to working at scale which has been hugely influential internationally. These projects, inter-relating visceral physical performance and site-responsive architectural theatre design, were undertaken with a verve, ambition, and iconoclasm rarely seen in British theatre. They were witnessed by thousands, and have become known to thousands more who did not see them.

Mike returned to the logic of making underpinning his Brith Gof period in outlining the creative methods and critical frameworks examined in his book, *Site-Specific Performance* (2010). A book for students, it offers a typically generous invitation to develop an aesthetic responsiveness to place and context, and to generate performative approaches to working through site and space. Mike was Professor of Performance Studies at Aberystwyth University (1997—2014), where he co-created the first BA Performance Studies in the UK and the MA Practising Performance. His charismatic presence shaped not only the generation of performance-makers and thinkers who studied with him but influenced the development of performance studies nationally and internationally. As a researcher, he championed a practice-based approach to knowledge production and critical enquiry, opening up the University to people and intelligences traditionally excluded by it. Together with Jenny Edkins and myself, he founded the Performance and Politics international research centre (2007—2018); and, with Heike Roms, curated the wonderful AHRC Landscape and Environment Programme conference, *Living Landscapes* (2009).

Throughout his tenure, Mike continued to make work as a solo artist, and in collaboration with Mike Brookes as Pearson/Brookes. He was invited to resume making large-scale works when the inaugural Artistic Director of National Theatre Wales, John E. McGrath, sought to reconnect the newly created national company with the site-specific practices and situated aesthetics that Mike had developed over the course of his career. The renaissance was extraordinarily successful, and Pearson/Brookes' projects for National Theatre Wales – *The Persians* (2010, at the MoD training range on Mynydd Epynt); *Coriolanus* (2012, at RAF St. Athan, as part of the World Shakespeare Festival); and *ILIAD* (2015, staged at Y Ffwrnes theatre) – are amongst the most important theatre events to have been staged this century (Kear 2013, 150—85). The two site-specific works continued the rich vein of thinking theatrically through space, place, and the politics of militarisation and depopulation, whilst *The Guardian* described *ILIAD* as 'certainly the theatrical event of the year. It may even be the theatrical event of the decade' (28 September 2015). Accordingly, his Lifetime Commendation Stephen Joseph award from ABTT reads, 'Mike Pearson, is without doubt,

one of the key theatre makers of our times, and perhaps the one who most helps us re-imagine the relationship of performance to audience' (2021).

But Mike was never entirely comfortable centre stage, preferring instead to make 'a virtue and an opportunity of a presumed geographical marginality' (Pearson 2005: 254). This might apply to not only Aberystwyth, or to North Lincolnshire, but to the extreme edges of exploration and inhabitation that fascinated him in the landscapes of Antarctica and the vicissitudes of polar expedition. Typically, Mike was not content to simply read about stories of Scott and *The Discovery*; he sought to rearticulate their traces archaeologically and reanimate them theatrically (Pearson 2004, 2009). For Mike, it was not sufficient to reimagine Shackleton's footsteps, he had to try to eat his boots (*The man who ate his boots*, 1998). In many ways, Mike was an adventurer and explorer too, working through the landscapes of contemporary performance to rediscover the promise of theatre's ancient potentiality: to expose what is present, and how we are exposed to one another.

Mike retired from Aberystwyth University in 2014, but continued his theatre-making, research and writing as Professor Emeritus (2014—2022), and as Honorary Professor for the University of Exeter. The same year, he formed Good News from the Future, a physical theatre company for the over 60s, inspired by *The Lesson of Anatomy*, which continues to meet every Sunday morning in Cardiff. When he passed, Mike was nearing completion of a new volume of *Theatre/Archaeology* with Michael Shanks, and he had plans afoot for new performance projects with National Theatre Wales. It was indicative of a life lived for and through performance that he kept innovating at every stage.

He is survived by his wife, fellow performance scholar Professor Heike Roms, whom he met in 1989 when touring *Gododdin* to Germany; his brother, Brian Pearson; and the countless students, researchers, and theatre-makers who bear the imprint of his influence, his humanity, and his teaching. Performance is a much, much smaller field without him.

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