

Between the Sun and the Moon

Calling up the Horizon on Stage

Robert Leveroos

space and how can we work with that today to instigate new ways of approaching performance? I will look at examples of artists who incorporate the horizon into their work, how they allow the givens of a space to unlock new viewing possibilities, and what is revealed when we zoom out from the human subject in performance.

Terminology | Performance \ Presentational Space \ Horizon

I use performance synonymously with what Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to as postdramatic theatre. Lehmann's definition states "theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and the spectating take place" (17). This definition emphasizes the collective nature of the space in which performance takes place. It is the live experience within that space that differentiates performance from other art forms, yet still includes music, dance, and new forms of media performance. As we enter the postdramatic the divisions between these performance forms blur. It's interesting to note these divisions also appear less important to the very artists creating the work. This can be seen in emerging new titles for these artists including live artist, performing artist, performance maker, and time-based artist. The link between these identities seems to be the exchange between audience and performer in a given space at a given time. In other words, a mutually exchanged breath. This mutual breath emphasizes the shared space.

Lehmann delineates aspects within this postdramatic theatre including its self-reflexive nature similar to other *post* movements. His work examines the exchange between audience and performer, and does so with a particular assessment of the space itself. It acknowledges the conundrum of the audience-performer relationship and the conventions inherent in theatrical space. I argue the most notable assumption we are still fighting against today is the proscenium arch. This arch is meant to delineate the fabricated representational performance from the audience – a representation created as a mirror image of the audience in order to reflect their very nature back to them. The proscenium traditionally marks this magic mirror threshold. Despite being unsettled in the 1960s and 1970s with the move towards black box theatre architectures, the proscenium delineation is still present whether or not the physical structure of the arch is in place. It will continue to be so long as these historical theatre architectures still exist. Whether or not a performer addresses the audience, the physical separation between them in space creates a threshold. In

his lecture "Breaking the Frame" Robert Lepage claims we must find new theatrical architectures if we are to create new theatre. Until this happens, my goal is to play within these architectures and use the given restrictions of three walls, a floor, and a contentious fourth wall to my advantage.

I am excluding outdoor, found, site-specific, and the myriad other off-site solutions performing artists utilize to address the audience-performer dynamic. I leave these out because I want to address the given space before breaking away from or avoiding it. There is still new territory to be found within these performance spaces. What can we do within them to offer new perspectives for audiences looking at performers and vice-versa?

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Thus far, it may be evident in my loose and often interchangeable wording for the space in which performance takes place, there is an array and often contradictory set of terms used to describe this area and the various elements within. None have been universally agreed upon. Gay McAuley does a commendable job investigating the various terms proposed by other scholars in her book *Space in Performance, Making Meaning in the Theatre*. She points out that the distinctions between *stage*, *set*, *setting*, *scenic space*, and the fictional spaces they represent are not so clearly delineated as terms such as *actor* or *character* (17).

The two terms I adopt from McAuley are *performance space* and *presentational space*. Distinct from the stage referring to the practitioner space and the auditorium referring to the audience space, the *performance space* is the "coming together of the other two. Overriding yet subsuming the division, the divided yet nevertheless unitary space in which the two constitutive groups (performers and spectators) meet and work together to create the performance experience" (26). To me there is no better concept to explore within an analysis of performance and the horizon than that very gray zone within which the audience and the performers meet. It needn't be a threshold but an encompassing space both inhabit together. The second term, *presentational space*, accounts for the use of the stage space, to include both the architectural elements inherent in any given stage space combined with the "physical use made of this stage space in any given performance" (29).

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In this text, addressing *presentational space* is our first venture into denoting any particular choices a production team makes within the performance space. Most *performance spaces* encompass audience and performer yet delineate between the two courtesy of a proscenium and invisible fourth wall. Performance makers can subsume that line by emphasizing another intrinsic but all together make-believe line located in the presentational space – the horizon.

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Before addressing the horizon within performance space, let's look at the horizon within nature. As outlined at the outset the horizon is one of the most poetic and confounding phenomenons of human experience on earth. It is the ultimate dichotomy of our existence; it is the union of that which is of the earth and that which is of the sky. It marks the line between what we can see and what we cannot, the line where the farthest reaches of what we know meets the unknown. Didier Maleuvre admirably unpacks the relationship human cultures have had with the horizon throughout time in his study *The Horizon – a history of our infinite longing*. He connects the horizon with the fundamental human desire to pursue the unknown. He states in the very outset of his exploration “the horizon holds an image of human finitude—our limitedness in time, space, and comprehension. The horizon isn't an objective boundary; it isn't really the place where earth and sky weld shut. It marks not the factual edge of the world, but the shifting line where perception trails off” (xiii). Simply by our ability to see the horizon, we the viewer must accept that we are grounded within the landscape rather than being above it. It is a reminder of our place within our world.

Now taking the basic ideas that the horizon is a) the intersection of that which is of Earth and that which is of the sky, b) the delineation between that which we can see and that which we cannot, c) the known versus the unknown, and d) only experienced by being on the earth, we'll examine the horizon within performance. Returning to the idea of postdramatic, when we get rid of drama in the theatre, what is left? The audience, the performers, and a space. If we get rid of the audience and performers (for a moment), what is left? A space – a set of walls, and a floor. McAuley points out that the most consistent element within the presentational space is a back wall of some sort. It could be the building architecture or a constructed set piece, it can be a curtain or a solid structure but its function is the same “to mark the limits of the stage, the interface with the offstage. It is the creation of a division between on and off, inside and outside, that permits the interplay of seen and unseen, revealed and hidden” (87). I would add, simply for completeness, the known and the unknown. It's assumed within McAuley's words, but for my



argument it must be clear: the other given within this space is the floor. Therefore it is in fact the line where the floor meets the back wall that creates the horizon for audiences within the performance space.

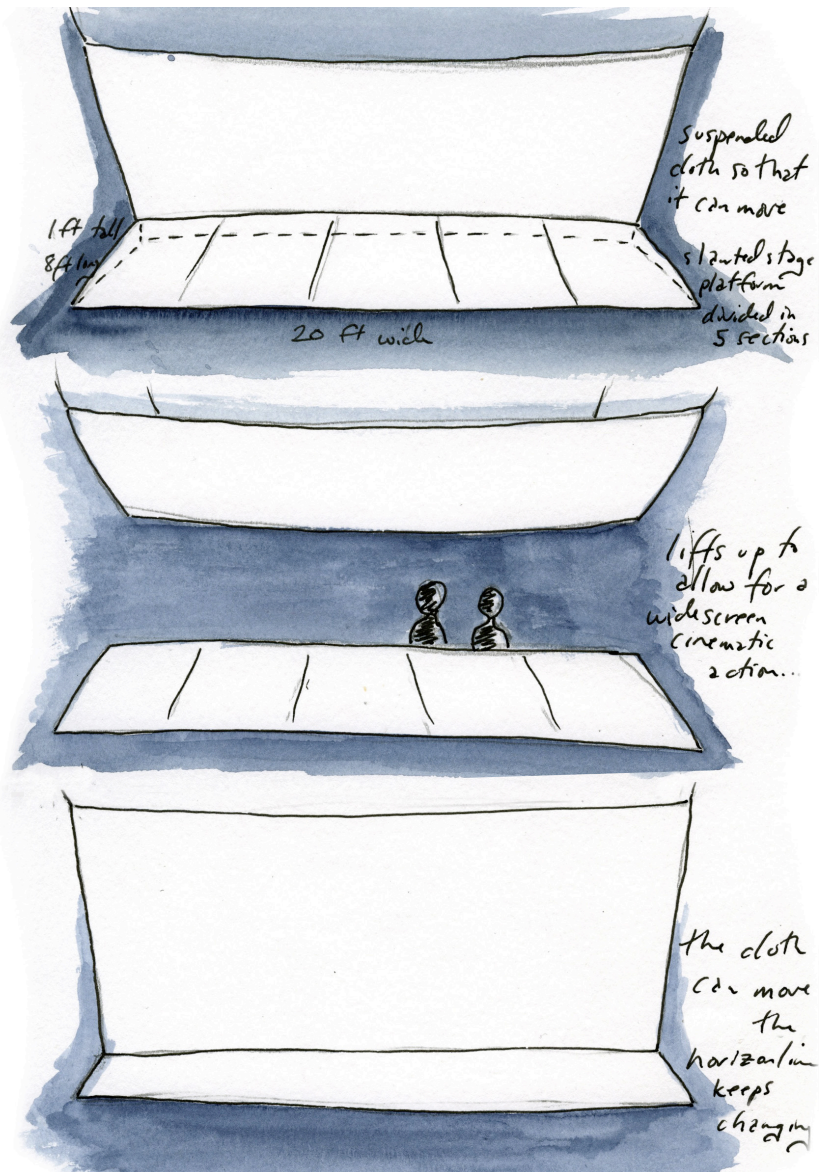
We've established that being able to see the horizon within the landscape automatically implicates the viewer within that landscape, therefore seeing the horizon line within the presentational space implicates the audience within the very act of performance within the performance space. It is a reminder that the audience is not separate from the space but within it. With this in mind we can safely forget about the fourth wall all together, it doesn't matter if there is a proscenium or not, whether we see it as a window or a frame, or try to ignore it all together. As long as the horizon line of the presentational space is visible, the viewer is implicated within the space itself.

The Unseen Horizon Line

The horizon line is ignored or all together left out of most performance. Performing artists have spent so much time worrying about the line between the audience and performers that they haven't addressed the line that indicates their existence within the same space. The line is either overlooked, a forgotten byproduct of the décor, or practitioners take the option to hide the line by focusing lights downstage, casting the presentational space's upstage architecture into darkness. Why would this be? The distance between audience, performer, and the edge of knowledge is embarrassingly short within the confines of the performance space. Perhaps the accepted solution is to ignore that limit altogether. Perhaps some illusion of enlightenment is maintained if we ignore how close we are to the end of our own knowledge.

In a performance tradition, defined by Paul Woodruff (and paraphrased admittedly flippantly) as human beings watching other human beings being human beings (38), it is easier to look at these two groups (audience and performers) by making a clear delineation between the two and seeing each side of the line as a ratio of 1:1. The humans on stage are a reflection of the humans in the audience, and this is clear because they are the same scale. In order to go beyond merely looking at humans with a matching eye-line we must push back the line of vision. We must open up the scope of our gaze and see the actual distance of the full presentational space. We must go from portrait to landscape view.





If we now consider this horizon line as the most important line uniting all humans both performer and audience within the performance space we open up the possibilities of our own knowledge of our universe and ourselves. Returning to Maleuvre who references Blaise Pascal "we, voyagers, can dream of would-be places and faraway worlds; we intuit the infinite; yet all this infinity highlights is, in the end, the limit of human knowledge: in the end we see only as far as we *can* see. And the more we know how limitedly we see, the more our imagination ventures beyond the blurry boundary, and the more we realize how bound-in-a-nutshell we are" (1). First we must recognize our own naval gazing within performance before we can open outward and push the limits of our understanding of the universe and our place within it, as humans have always longed for.

Highlighting the Horizon Line

Now that we know the horizon line within the presentational space let's look at how it is used practically on stage. We'll break down examples of how it has been acknowledged and disrupted in performance. Performance, in its very nature is ephemeral and local. I can only attempt to demonstrate these ideas based on pieces I have seen, and do not claim this is an exhaustive look. It is meant to point out when it is used, so hopefully you add to the list with your own

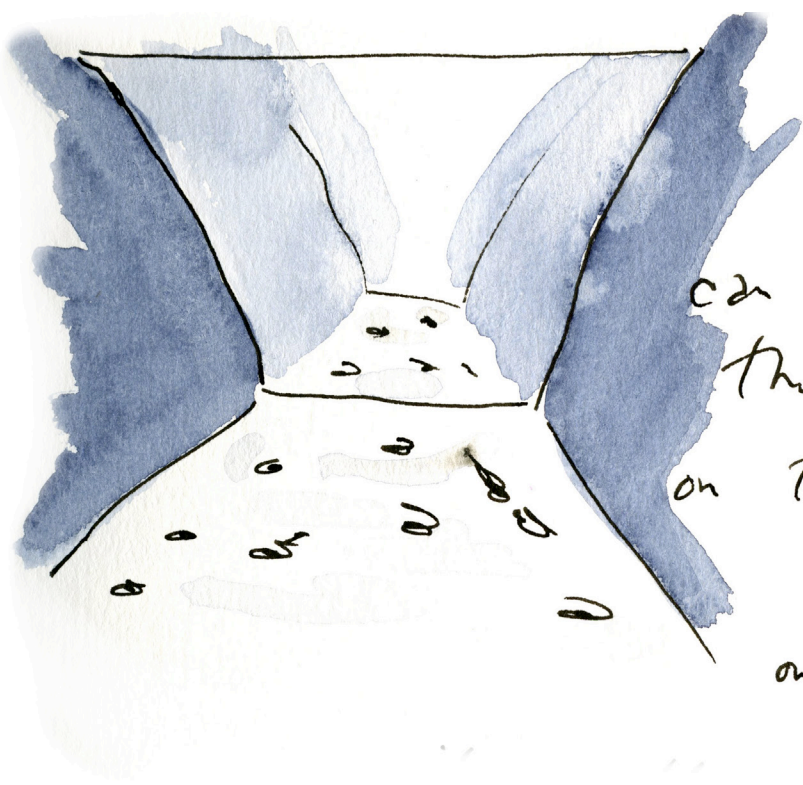
performance examples. While it may not be complete, it is an approach divided by method: playing against the floor \ breaking the back wall \ separating earth from sky \ and zooming out.

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Robert Lepage is known for using stage space to question prescribed viewpoints. In the Las Vegas Cirque du Soleil spectacle *Ka*, he reimagines the stage as an enormous moving tectonic plate that acrobats must negotiate. This plate has no fixed ground. It can be shifted sideways or raised to create a vertical plane that the performers scale using harnesses and footholds. As in this work, Lepage often imagines new ways of seeing humans in environments. He describes his production *Needles and Opium* as a search for a new vanishing point on stage (*Breaking the Frame*). However I want to look specifically at a moment when he uses the horizon line to challenge our expectations and our own foundation in the theatre seats.

In *Far Side of the Moon*, Lepage's solo performance looking at the moon race, the space is set with a wall fairly close to the front edge of the stage spanning the width of the presentational space. It is crowned by a second wall of mirrors running the same width as the wall beneath it. The intersection of this first wall and the wall of mirrors is essentially a horizon line. The bank of mirrors is on a hinge with the first wall and can be lowered and tilted forward creating a slanted roof over the performer below. In the show's final moment the character sits in a waiting room. The row of chairs rest on their backs facing upstage with all feet against the vertical wall. We watch the scene through the mirror roof. This perspective creates an illusion of the performer sitting right side up. The performer with his back on the floor and his head facing the audience slowly pushes himself towards the audience, and in our view through the mirror he appears to be rising out of the waiting room chair defying the laws of gravity. By acknowledging the horizon line in his set design Lepage is able to simultaneously create a celestial, weightless image in the mirror, and a grounded "real" image connected to the stage. By doing this he uses the floor to make the floor disappear. Lepage offers a way to renegotiate our assumptions of the ground.

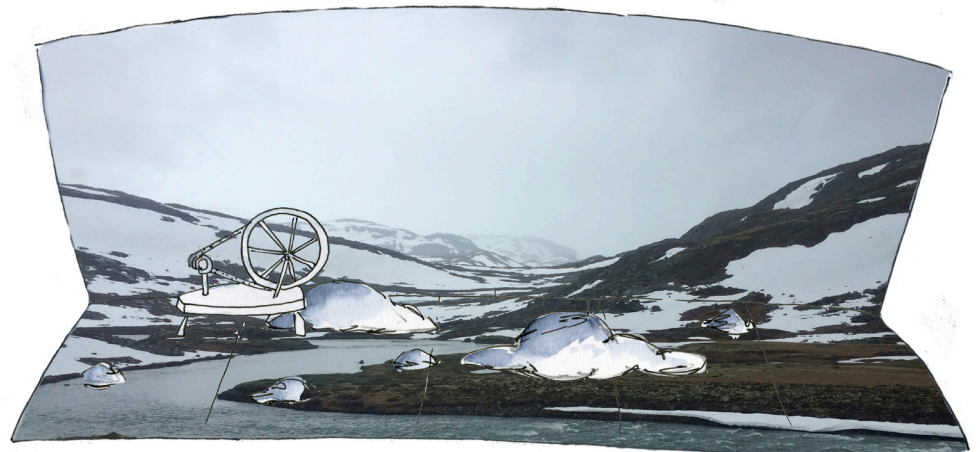
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can I create the fjords
through negative space?
on the macro level of
simultaneously have them
on a micro level topographically?

Playing against the presentational space's back wall can also challenge our expectations of the horizon line. If we assume that the back wall is the limit of the scope of our sight within the theatre, then we could see further by extending that back wall. How do you do this with a fixed architecture that presumably ends with some sort of brick wall?

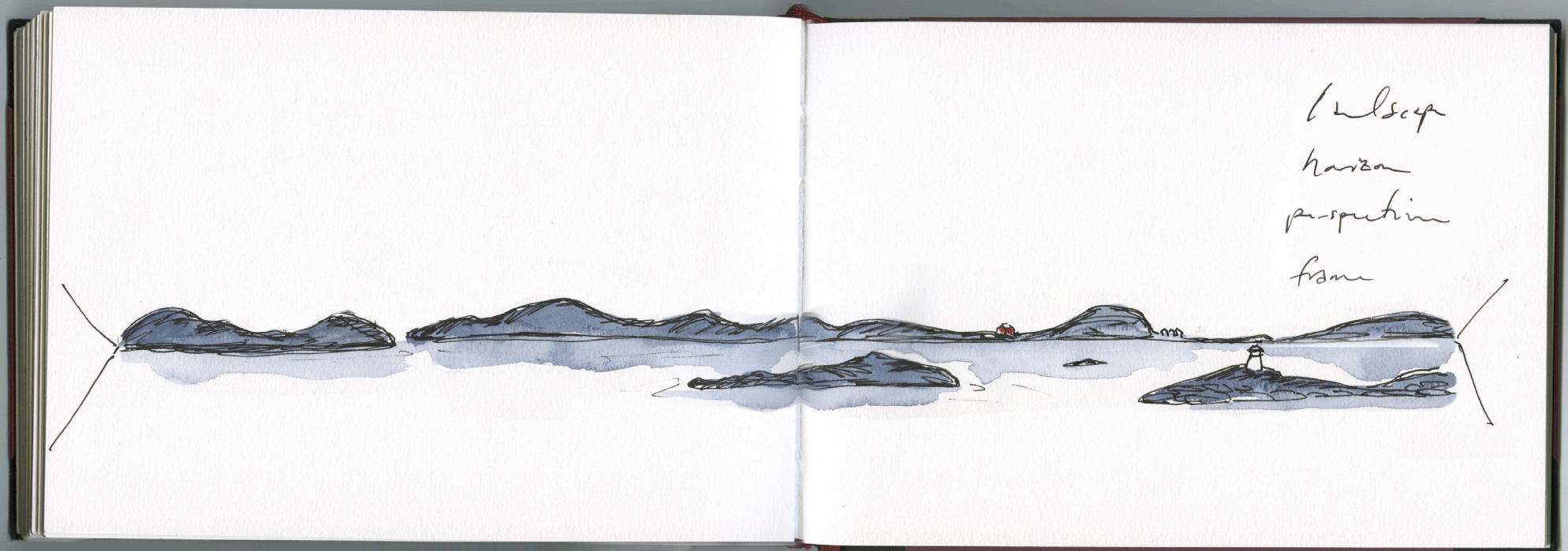
Simply stand between two mirrors and you'll encounter your reflection bouncing between the two making your image and the surroundings trail off into infinity. I take this phenomenon a step further in my performance *Fragile*, where a series of two dimensional paper sculptures are assembled into three-dimensional forms to create miniature sets that are videoed and projected live. The audience sees both the making of the image, and the fabricated image projected on a wall within the presentational space. In one of the scenes, a paper figure looks into their bathroom mirror, they see their own image change before their eyes. They see the possible faces they show to the world, or that they hide within themselves. Finally the mirror opens up in front/behind them, giving them tunnel vision through their own bathroom walls, though in this case it leads into the bathroom of another character in the midst of the same reflective experience. Then the entire mirror tunnel starts to spin on a revolving stage, so that the audience sees the optical illusion from all sides, adding yet another dimension to the situation.



This example is constructed on a miniature scale, so technically it does not break the actual brick wall of the presentational space. However, the performance is set up as the making of a performance with all of the (traditionally) onstage and offstage elements visible. The paper set constructed within the video composition can be seen as a stand in for the full theatre space. It still uses the familiar architectures to address their limitations. Puppetry and object theatre also have an advantage in breaking the conventions inherent in performance space. These objects are not bound to the same gravity human performers are. They can manipulate our dimensional perspective in space. I use another example with puppetry later.

Liquid Loft, an Austrian performance company, also breaks the back wall in *Deep Dish*, a performance helmed by Chris Haring. The production features a lavishly dressed table of food. The performers engage with the food on the table over the course of a dinner party. By the end of the meal all social constraints are gone and the performers stand on the table, sprawl across it, squeeze and pulverize the food. This action is captured live on video by a handheld camera operated by the performers within the space. It is projected onto the full width and height of the

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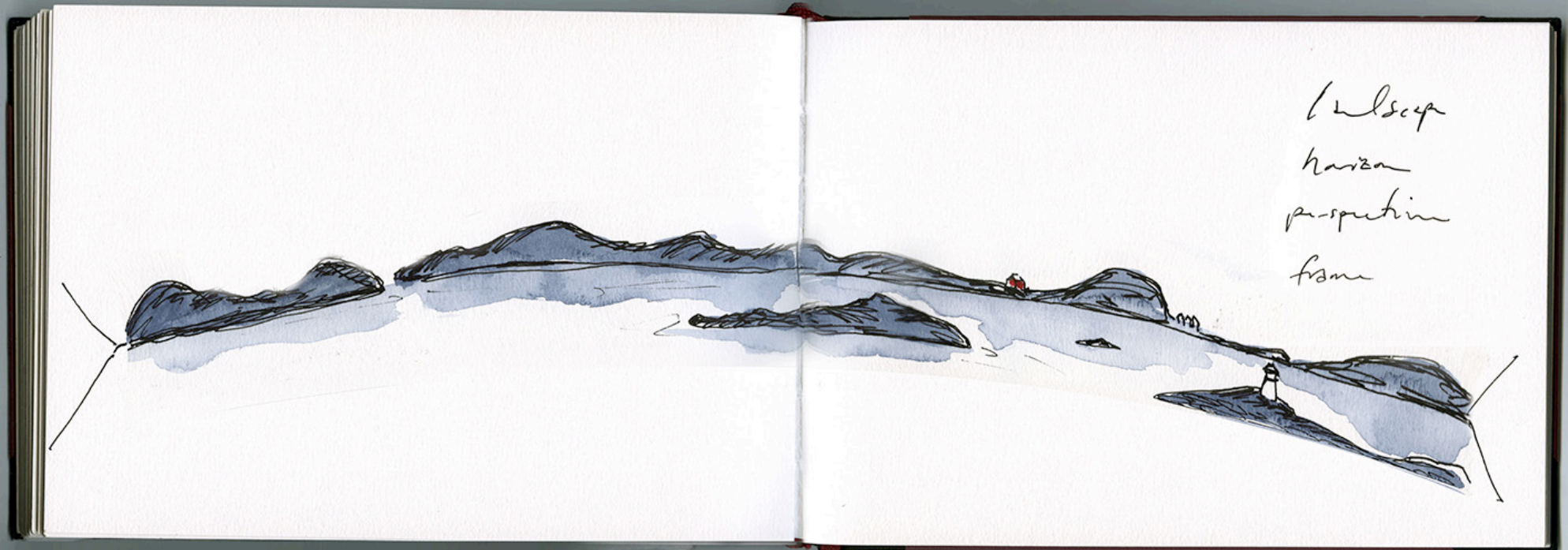


upstage wall behind them. The camera captures the scene on the table while facing the wall, so it simultaneously captures the projection on the wall behind it. This continuous capture creates the same infinity effect as the bathroom mirror though uses the live camera to do so.

Liquid Loft uses the limit of the back wall as an obstacle to play against. By actually using the architecture of this wall and drawing focus to it, the wall can disappear. In *Deep Dish*, when they create this infinity chain we glimpse a sea of diners' legs raised above the table top floating off into a newly proposed horizon that lies far beyond the given presentational space. This suggests we can use the theatre itself to see beyond the walls of the theatre, to push the boundaries of our own horizon.

We have seen a break in both the floor and the back wall, now let's look at breaking the line distinguishing the two, the earth from the sky. New Zealand-born, Belgium-based performing artist Kate McIntosh makes this break in her piece *Dark Matter*, a masterful and playful look at quantum physics. The presentational space appears empty from the beginning of the show, save for one thick and imposing rope downstage left. It

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hangs as a question mark through the performance. After covering the stage in various detritus from scientific demonstrations, McIntosh projects the image of the earth's surface onto the stage floor. A black backdrop fit with twinkle lights illuminates the back wall creating the quintessential theatrical starry night – a stage trick so familiar it is a cliché, one that McIntosh clearly uses to her advantage. This horizon line is quite literal.

In the show's final moments, McIntosh walks downstage and gives a comical full body pull on the thick rope. The upstage twinkle curtain, so stationary it could be a wall, is jerked upwards. The curtain rises from stage left. Though it only rises one foot, and not evenly across the stage, the impact is enormous. A golden light from behind the curtain floods the stage floor. While the audience had presumed the floor's intersection with the back curtain was a fixed line, in one gesture McIntosh disrupts our basic assumption of the theatre space. She affirms that every belief of ours can be called into question by simply pulling a string. As Copernicus once re-centered our solar system around the sun, McIntosh uses the spatial conventions of the theatre world itself, a curtain, to point to the universe and questions our given understanding of it. While we may not be able to physically sever the true horizon line, doing so on stage points out the fragility of our foundational hypotheses, our continual quest for new knowledge, and new ways to see our universe and our orientation within it.

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So far we've looked at the horizon from an earthly vantage – as that's the only vantage from which to see the horizon. But, as the world's people saw when the first astronauts circumnavigated the moon and caught a photograph of the Earth in its entirety, our understanding of existence shifts when we see our world encapsulated in a tiny orb (Lepage, Robert). The stage space can also create this shift. It can show our humanly place in the universe beyond the conventional 1:1 human view we are used to seeing on stage. Again it has everything to do with throwing off the given assumption of the ground and the upstage wall. I return to puppetry to show this possibility. *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, created by The Old Trout Puppet Workshop, demonstrates this explicitly. The piece is a meditation on death as known from cultures around the world. It is only fitting that they zoom out at a certain point to give a view of the world as a whole.

Within a puppet theatre proscenium frame the curtain opens on a topographic view of a square patch of green lawn. A figure stands in the centre of this field. All we can make out is the round crown of this person's head. Sound indicates a baseball game in progress. A batter strikes



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a ball. In this slow motion sequence the ball strikes the figure in the middle, a small boy. His on-the-spot death is beautifully depicted by his measured look to the sky (in this staging this means towards us the audience). The patch of green lawn moves upstage, getting smaller in the puppet proscenium, and giving the impression that the boy is rising into the sky. The green lawn disappears and that familiar image of the green and blue ball of land we've only ever seen in photographs replaces it. As the earth fades away like the lawn before it, new planets float into frame and the boy swirls through space free from Earth's gravity below.

Once again, we see on stage the offering of an unexpected vantage point, made possible by theatrical construction. All it took was for the green grass to hang vertically on a moveable wall. By bringing it further away from the audience in the presentational space, within the confines of the framed puppet theatre, the audience fills in the rest and sees a telescoping view of the earth receding into the darkness upstage.

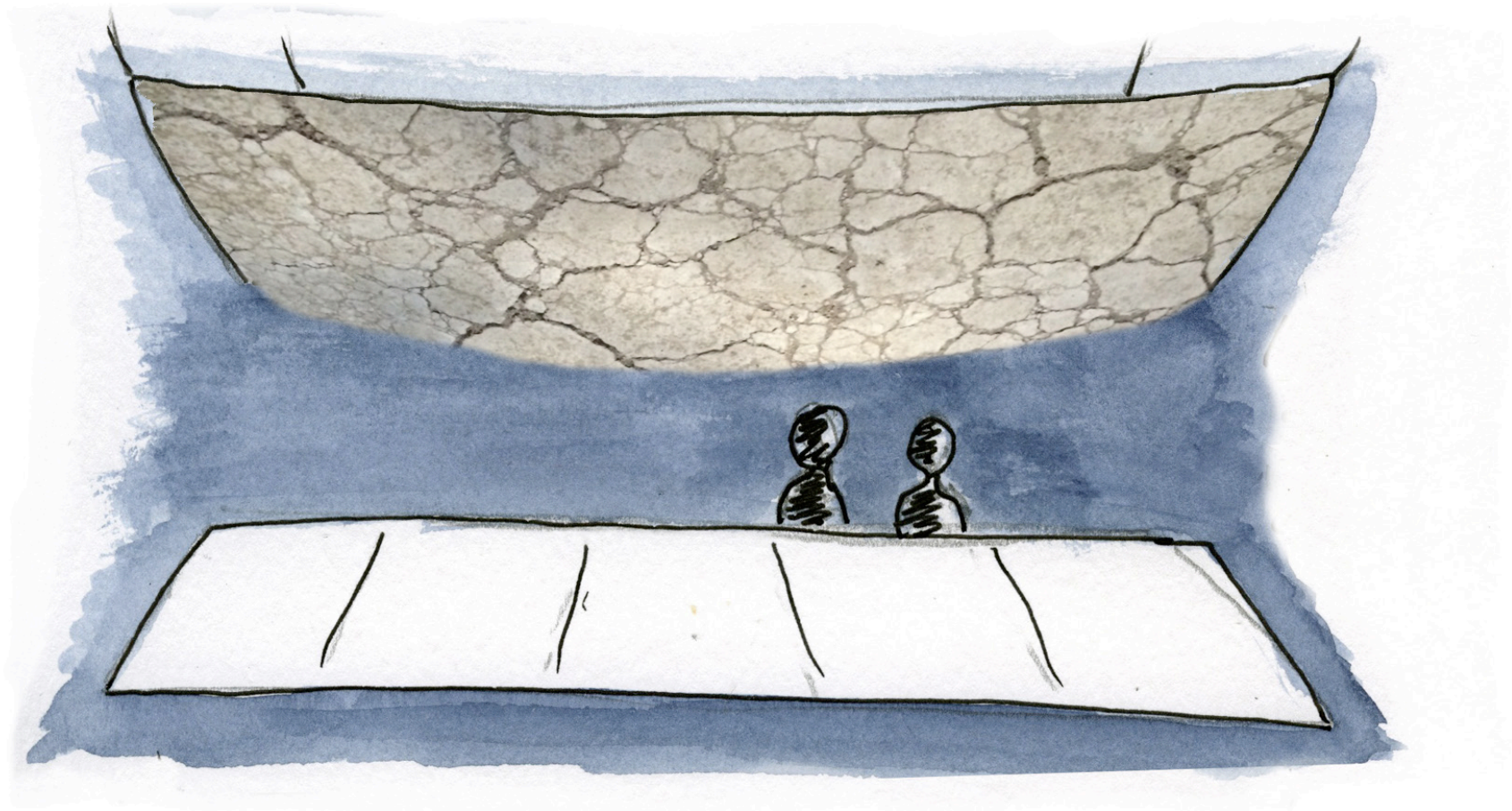
Pointing Outward

The anti-gravitational connection between *Far Side of the Moon* and *Famous Puppet Death Scenes* is fitting. It points out our human longing to go beyond our imposed connection to Earth and to explore the outer limits of our knowledge. This is much the same as Maleuvre describing the horizon. He says it is the “shifting frontline between knowledge and reality... an image of the elusive, slippery, onward character of our limitedness in time, space, and understanding” (2). We can push against the edge of our human comprehension by acknowledging the architectural limits of the performance space and use them to our advantage in the theatre.

It is hard to say what exactly happens in the audience the moment the horizon line is challenged. Yet, it is worth noting that all of the examples laid out are climactic moments used by these artists within larger works. Just as things seem familiar these practitioners throw the viewer off balance, questioning our boundaries. They allow audiences to defy the laws of gravity for mere moments, to venture into unknown galaxies. If art's domain is within the celestial, it makes sense to bring audiences into that realm by establishing their attachment to a foundation and then freeing them from it.

After destabilizing the horizon line in performance, new avenues of inquiry emerge. Further investigation is required into the immediate effect this shifting horizon can have on an audience. This can be better researched through practical application, and is the focus of my artistic project. Other questions of interest include how scale in performance can play a role in shifting our perspectives, and what happens to theatre when we zoom out. One day will we see a theatre void of humans all together?

As the universe itself, our concept of it is ever expanding. We're just beginning to see the highest quality images ever taken of our most distant neighbour. On July 14, 2015 NASA's aptly named New Horizons Spacecraft made a flyby of Pluto (Talbert). It will take the rest of the year to transmit the full set of images, however what's already clear from those we've seen is their ability to contribute to human knowledge and simultaneously to feed our voracious curiosity for the unknown. We will continue to question our place between the sun, the moon, the furthest planets, and beyond. Even within the closed theatrical architectures we inhabit today we can begin to breathe life into these outer reaches.



Figures*

- 1) iPhone Assemblage Land\scape, Norway
- 2) iPhone Assemblage Sea\scape, Norway
- 3) Oslo Opera House, iPhone photo
- 4) Trollfjorden, iPhone photo
- 5) *Between Two Rocks* - Set Design Sketch
- 6) *Between Two Rocks* - Set Design Progression
- 7) Detail of Research Notebook
- 8) *Between Two Rocks* - Set Design Assemblages
- 9) Research Notebook Assemblage Study
- 10) Research Notebook Assemblage Study
- 11) Research Notebook Infinity Design for *Between Two Rocks*
- 12) *Between Two Rocks* - Set Design Assemblage

*all figures created by Robert Leveroos

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