The Whistle
- an interactive staging strategy

INTRODUCTION

"The Whistle" is an experiment about a staging strategy, about cinematic effects onstage, about technical ability. It is about playing a game with the audience, and letting them in on the creation process. Giving the audience some of the creative power and letting them have a choice, ultimately it is an experiment about perception.

The concept

The concept of "The Whistle" is almost genius in its simplicity: the performer onstage has a whistle. When he blows it, the audience closes their eyes, when he blows it again, they open them. Make that performer onstage a juggler and physical performer, mastering the art of precision, and the possibilities are endless. That was roughly the idea that Irish Darragh McLoughlin proposed for RAPP 2014.

Using this whistle-technique Darragh wanted to approach the stage as if it was film, having multiple storylines in a performance and letting the audience make cuts between them, jumping in time and place and sometimes even defying the laws of physics (as possible on the screen). Furthermore – and initially even as just an extra treat - Darragh wanted to make sure the "the cheaters" – the ones that do not follow the whistle-rule – get an extra experience all to themselves. During the week, the cheating aspect of the concept would become a more central part of the experiment, seeing that this acknowledgement of the audience's power in the performance situation was crucial to the whole idea of the whistle. But more on this later.

Framing the experiment

Darragh's experiment obviously needed an audience to work, and the week was therefore planned out so that Darragh had a small audience available every afternoon. This proposed a fundamental challenge. Because the audience had such a crucial part in the experiment – being the ones that enable the whistle-effect – the structure of the experiment was easily mistaken for a "regular" performance situation. This created some difficulties both in terms of constructing the experiment without getting caught up in the wish to entertain and please an audience, and in terms of getting precise feedback.

The format of the daily experiments thus changed during the week. From short performances in the first three days, devised with the aim of having a dramaturgical flow, to more technical, focused "tests" of the material on different levels. This latter format made it much easier to actually withdraw useful information from the audience, but it also made the different aspects of the whistle-concept clear and tangible.

An overview of the week
Day 1
Work during the day: General introduction into the juggling material and the cinematic potential of the whistle.
Showing: A small performance constructed from 4 different narratives. Using the whistle effect only as a cutting tool, i.e. the sequences with closed eyes (from now on described as "black sequences") was only used as a practicality (letting Darragh set up for the different storylines) and a basic cinematic effect (cutting in between time and place). Incorporated in the showing is a scene that introduces the rule of the whistle. The scene is repeated twice.

Day 2
Work during the day: Experimenting with the potential of the black sequences, asking ourselves: can we get people to cheat by letting them hear different things (for example: having a very long black sequence where Darragh sat on a chair, eating a banana and holding up a sign saying "cheater")?
Showing: A small performance consisting of one primary storyline with juggling-material, cut up by black sequences and sequences with a microphone, talking to the audience. The introduction scene is still part of the showing.

Day 3
Work during the day: Combining the material with music, trying to enhance the cohesiveness of the juggling-material in a specific storyline.
Showing: A small performance, similar to the one the day before, using the black sequences actively, using the microphone and with one primary storyline (created with juggling material) throughout the performance. The introduction scene is still part of the showing.

Day 4
Work during the day: Defining how to go about doing laboratory work in this setting. Pinpointing the different cinematic effects that the whistle-technique could potentially have, and finding simple choreographic material to test it on the audience.
Showing: A series of small, separate choreographies each testing a thesis about the cinematic effects.
No longer with the introduction incorporated in the showing. The rule is instead introduced as a premise for the showing to begin with, and it stays like that for the rest of the week.

Day 5
Work during the day: Experimenting with the game aspect of the whistle, creating material from the idea of splitting up the audience into two groups – one group having their eyes closed, while the other one had them open.
Showing: 3 separate experiments, all of them with the audience in two groups. Working with one group seeing and hearing something totally different than the other; having a backstage-group that only saw the setup and the origin of the different sounds feeding the other group's imagination; and finally making the groups move around, playing a game with both Darragh and each other.

Day 6
Work during the day: Working with a second performer – in this case a violinist. Creating a very clear storyline to cut up. Experimenting with how this extra person allows us to tempt the audience to cheat (among other things by letting them have a short glimpse of a gorilla disappearing behind the backdrop).
Showing: 3 separate experiments each testing different things – the audience's ability to follow a storyline cut up by black sequences; experimenting with doing impossible tricks (taking advantage of having a second performer, that the audience doesn't know about); testing the limits as to how many hints it takes to make the audience cheat.

Day 7
Work during the day: Preparing for the conference. Discussing our findings and how to show and tell.
Showing: A high-lights performance with several different experiments. A kind of dress rehearsal for the conference.

CREATING THE GAME
The whistle-concept is – as previously described – a way of involving the audience in the creative process. Even though the audience members do not necessarily move from their seats, they are actually playing a pivotal role in the story making, since they themselves decide when they open and close their eyes.

But we realised that this special position of the audience is not necessarily obvious to themselves. For them to realise that this technique is actually very different from the regular blackout, we had to first of all make it very clear, that this is *a game.*

Activating the black
After the first showing it became very clear that if the whistle-effect was only used as a practical tool to hide the setup for the next scene or as a means to create the cinematic jump in time and space, soon the audience became detached from the situation. We might as well have used a regular black out. We had to figure out how to maintain the initial curiosity that the audience had when first introduced to the rule.

By focusing on the black sequences as material in themselves, often teasing the audience with strange sounds and pointing to the fact that they couldn't look, we found out that the whole concept shifted from the audience participating on a technical level to being aware of their own participation.

For instance we made a scene where Darragh came onto stage and said: "I'm going to change my clothes now. Please don't look". Then he whistled and the audience closed their eyes. Darragh changed his clothes onstage, making the black sequence last about a minute without anything else happening (no special sounds and so on). Even though this sequence didn't feed the imagination of the audience in any way, not telling any story in itself, it very efficiently made the audience members aware that they had a *choice* to look.

Illusions and expectations
Another important way of enhancing the game aspect was to play with the
expectations of the audience, making the result of a black sequence a surprise. The
clearest example of this is what Darragh called "The impossible trick":

Making a set up, having the audience close and open their eyes, and then something
physically impossible for the one person onstage to have done, has happened.

This would – we imagined – help point to the fact, that the audience was watching a
kind of magic trick but, unlike usual magic shows, having the choice to see how the
trick is done. Or – if the trick is not repeated – letting them know, that they robbed
themselves of the answer to how the trick was done. This kind of trick, though,
actually *was* impossible for Darragh to do alone (otherwise it wouldn't be an
impossible trick), so we didn't try this until day 6, when we had an extra performer.
But the setup for the trick that we tried was too unclear – we underestimated how
focused the audience would be on what Darrragh did onstage, that the change that
happened far away from him (which it had to, of course, to make it seemingly
impossible yet still actually possible), wasn't noticed. This was one of many
experiments that wasn't successful due to the fact that it wasn't completely polished
and precise. One of the many reasons – we found – that laboratory work with an
audience is extremely difficult. But more on that in the last part of the rapport.

WHO'S CHEATING
One of the most fascinating parts of The Whistle-concept is the thought of awarding
the cheaters with special glimpses into a completely separate and secret storyline. The
risk that someone is cheating is a natural consequence of inviting the audience to play
a game, and to be able to use this creatively would be unexpected and fun.

What makes you cheat?
It was a big challenge bringing the cheating aspect into the experiments seeing as the
Danish audience wasn't keen on breaking the rules. To force the audience to cheat we
had to go to extremes.

First of all we tried dividing the audience into two groups beforehand, so that one
group saw one half of the showing, and the other group saw the other half[1]. With this
experiment we wanted to test, among other things, if it made the audience more
curious to know what was happening when they weren't looking, knowing that other
audience members were. Maybe the fact that what they weren't seeing was meant to
be seen by someone else would make them cheat. To a certain extent it turned out that
we were right: Most of the audience members spent the time with their eyes closed
thinking that they would have preferred to be in the other group. Still, they didn't
cheat!

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[1] In Video #2 at approx. 0:02:40, you hear an audience reaction to this specific experiment. She
mentions that during the showing she switched from one group to the other even though following the
rule. This happened to almost everyone because of a whistle mistake.

The next day we had the privilege of working with a second performer – a very talented violinist, who, besides playing the violin, agreed to dress up as a gorilla, helping us to lure the audience to cheat. For example, we tried giving the audience a short glimpse of the gorilla just at the end of a black sequence (making it look like it was a mistake – that the audience wasn't supposed to see the gorilla), hoping that it would make some of them look in the next black sequence. This didn't happen. Not until the gorilla walked onstage (her footsteps sounding noticeably different than Darraghs due to the costume) and stood close to the audience, grunting, did people open their eyes. But then we had pushed it so far that everybody looked.

The potential of cheating
When asked whether or not he wants the audience to cheat, Darragh replies (as seen in the video #2): *"I don't know, I don't really care actually. I want it to be up to you."*, and he explains that what he would really like to find out is *"What makes* some *people cheat?"*

This statement, I think, indirectly pinpoints what the fascination about the cheating is. Because, as Darragh describes, it is crucial that the audience isn't told that they are free to cheat, and it is very important that only *some* of the audience members cheat. But why?

I think that what Darragh seeks to explore is if a real connection between performer and audience members can be established – an authentic moment of togetherness - and for this to happen, it needs to be as un-manipulated as possible. If Darragh, when making his introduction to the concept, told the audience that they themselves decide whether or not to follow the rule, then he would foresee the "cheating" and label it as much a part of the performance design as everything else. If on the other hand he pushes the whole audience to cheat (as we did with the gorilla), then the "cheating" becomes yet another planned part of the show – something expected on Darraghs part. What potentially could happen – if someone in the audience decided to look when they were not supposed to, without being told that they could or pushed by irresistible hints that "something is going on" – then the power balance between the performer and the audience could shift, or be levelled out, and a non-theatrical meeting might occur within the frame of a theatrical performance. I think the potential of this connection is sensed intuitively by both the performer(s) and the audience, and that this is where the fascination and unique potential of the whistle concept lies.

DISCOVERIES AND SURPRISES
Through our many individual experiments/tests and the daily interviews with audiences, we found out a lot of different things during the week. On a concrete level, Darragh tested different material and had the chance to ask questions about whether or not certain tricks or illusions worked. Also we found out general things about how the concept works: how difficult yet important to control what the audience notices and when; the importance of being completely precise as to the timing of the whistle and the significance of where the whistle sound comes from.

Changing the dramaturgy
On another level the experiment made us question the fundamental dramaturgy of the performance "The Whistle". Where Darragh had thought that the finished performance would consist of several different storylines intertwined with each other using the whistle as a cutting tool between them, we found that that might not be the most apt dramaturgy to realise the potential of the whistle. It is simply too difficult to keep the different storylines apart given the very abstract and non-narrative performance material that Darragh wants to show. Of course we would be able to create recognisable identifiers for each storyline (for example a red flower in the background or Darragh wearing a hat), but it would – we guess after this process – be only a pro forma separation of the individual scenes. It wouldn't create a mental or emotional seperation and therefore cutting between the storylines would at best work on a mechanical level rather than as a dramaturgy. The multiple storylines
might work, though, if there were more than one performer, which is an aspect we only tested out very briefly (focusing mainly on testing the limits for cheating when we had the chance to work with the violinist).
Instead Darragh after the experiment plans to divide the performance into blocks of different kinds of material, where the different possibilities of the whistle technique can evolve into each other – each block enhancing one aspect of the whistle.

Theatricality vs. laboratory
Besides the specific findings about the whistle-concept, the experiment made me think about the difficulties in doing experiments in a performance-like setting. Because both the mindset of the "laboratory" and the mindset of the "theatre" is influencing the situation for both performer / experiment leader and audience.

In this specific experiment, for instance, the reason why the audience didn't cheat might have to do with the extraordinary circumstances of *the experiment*: People might be afraid of ruining the results of the experiment, thus not acting as freely as they might at a regular performance. Also the audience didn't experience a dramaturgically coherent show, but rather small scenes taken out of context and thus never really had the time to get confident and relaxed enough to make the decision to cheat. These different sources of error couldn't – under these circumstances – be helped and so the cheating actually couldn't really be tested before having the full performance, because the audience's behaviour depends on so many different parameters.

On the other hand, even though the showings were not a finished performance, the theatrical situation was difficult to shake off.
The first couple of days we felt the need to give an introduction to the audience, telling them that this wasn't a finished piece or even a work in progress as such, but after the showings, the audience kept asking: "Why are you saying this isn't a finished piece? I can't help experiencing it as if it was…" This comment almost poses the question: *where is the line between experiment and performance?*
Is it only a question of informing the audience beforehand (clearly not) or is it up to the individuals to decide their approach to the situation? Or is it at all possible, even for the audience themselves, to control? Is it ever possible to distance yourself

from the theatrical, emotional experience and simply observe, being focused on the perception rather than the interpretation?[2]

My guess is that you can only try to guide the audience as to how they should approach the situation – as a regular audience or as participants in an experiment. Nevertheless this is definitely something one must reflect upon when doing experiments that involve an audience.

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[2] Not all experiments involving an audience seek to achieve this, of course. But then it might be a challenge to avoid it...