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Hotel Plays: (Sub)liminal paratexts of performance in functioning hotels

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‘Hotels are for those who understand performance: ghosts, actors, women...’

‘All hotels invite decoding and every hotel is a “concept hotel”.’

— Joanna Walsh, *Hotel*¹

Hotels have long stimulated the imagination across diverse genres of art as an imaginative topos. They have a variety of attributes engrained in their spaces: they can be a space for temporary sojourn, offering a momentary escape from the everyday life of home; a space where the interplay between ever-changing faces and mundane routines are repeated; and a space with the potential for momentary encounters with ‘others’. In contrast, the highly structured space of hotels, marked by repetitive patterns of often identical rooms and staircases across the building, dictates the movement of people and retains the anonymity of the faces and activities within its walls. Hotels have inspired a variety of fictional narratives: they offer themselves as a backdrop for a number of novels, such as *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) by John Irving, *Dance Dance Dance* (1988 (Japanese); 1994 (English translation)) by Haruki Murakami which is set in the Dolphin Hotel, and *Hotel World* (2001) by Ali Smith. Films also have found inspiration in the hotel space: it can be depicted as a place where a psychological horror takes place as in *The Shining* (1980); a place where the strangers come together in search of a new life as in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*

¹ Joanna Walsh, ‘Hotel Haunting’, *Hotel* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p.6.

(2011); or an institution where a fairy-tale like adventure of an eccentric concierge and his junior bellboy is related as in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2015).

Theatre is no exception in taking inspiration from a hotel space. Firstly, there are numerous plays that have a hotel as a backdrop for drama to evolve. Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930) sets a serendipitous reunion of previously married couple of Elyot and Amanda at adjacent balconies of hotel rooms, exploiting an image of a resort hotel where such an out-of-the-ordinary happenstance can be believable. *Separate Tables* (1954) by Terence Rattigan, on the other hand, is set in the Beauregard Private Hotel, where quiet lives and routines are stirred up when the private secrets of the residents are revealed, and create uncomfortable tensions amongst them. More recently, *Blasted* (1995) by Sarah Kane is set in '[a] very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world'.² Harrowing violence and graphic scenes unfold in a bourgeois hotel space, which is then exploded and transformed into a battleground later in the play. A very different kind of intersection between hotels and theatre occurs when hotels welcome theatre as entertainment for their guests; indeed, some hotels incorporate a purpose-built auditorium within their premises. 'Hotel theatre' also takes a form of Murder Mystery nights with a spectacle, a dinner and a weekend away all combined: it is an entertainment tuned to the occasion where strangers are brought together. Moreover, in recent years, and of especial interest for this paper, functioning hotels have become a productive locale for site-specific productions. Not all site-specific performances directly respond to the site they take over. Disused warehouses prove to be one of the common spaces for site-specific productions, whose transient nature is often exploited. The warehouses offer a large open space that is neutral enough to be

² Sarah Kane, *Blasted* (London: Methuen Drama, 2002), p.3.

transformed into any possible way; recent examples include *The Architect* (2013) by Shunt at V22 workspace, a former biscuit factory warehouse. This production takes the audience through maze-like corridors; a lounge in a cruise ship; and finally, to the bare open space of the warehouse. However, site-specific productions in functioning hotels often take their inspiration from and exploit the complex ideas of hotel life by placing their narratives in active hotels, where daily businesses take place as normal. Such performances go beyond simply appropriating the physical space for the performance purposes, strongly implying the activity within in addition. Hotels as a locale for performance are layered by multiple actions and figures that move through the space: customers; employees; and non-resident visitors to the facilities and functions. It is not only that imagined hotels represented through performance are played out within the actual hotel space, but that performance also plays out the drama of the hotel. As I will argue, the richness of the site supports the performance, and in return the performance interacts critically with the everyday life of the hotel.

Site-specific productions which use functioning hotels vary greatly in their interpretation of what hotel space can offer. Some productions focus on intimacy offered by hotel rooms, while others draw attention to hotels' luxury and extraordinary feel. *The Reservation* (2012) by Ellie Harrison and Jaye Kearney invites an audience of one for an hour-long encounter with a performer in a hotel room. This piece sees a hotel room as a metaphor of grief and loss, where one arrives with heavy luggage and with the prospect of leaving at a certain point.³ *Above and Beyond* (2013) by Look Left Look Right similarly offers a One-to-One experience,⁴ yet it invites the

³ Ellie Harrison and Jaye Kearney, *The Reservation* (Part 2 of *The Grief Series*), premiered in 2012 at the Queen's Hotel, Leeds <<http://griefseries.co.uk/the-reservation>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

⁴ As Rachel Zerihan explains in her *Live Art Development Agency Study Room Guide on One to One Performance*, "'One to One' or 'One on One' or 'Audience of One' are all terms to describe a performance that invites one audience member to experience the piece on their own.' Hereafter, I

audience member to become the protagonist of a narrative of ‘disguise, old-world romance and a wartime escapade’ in a five-star grand hotel in London.⁵ It plays with the comparison between a grand hotel and a theatre, as Lyn Gardner describes that they both have ‘on-stage and backstage worlds’, a public space for ‘people’s personal drama to unfold’ and private spaces ‘where unseen spectacles take place behind closed doors’.⁶ A production by Almeida Theatre, *The Fever* (2015) staged in an opulent hotel suite, invites a small audience (maximum twenty-five) to witness Wallace Shawn’s monologue performed by Tobias Menzies. The speech presents the dilemma of the protagonist, who finds himself ‘in a strange hotel room, in a poor country where [his] language is not spoken’.⁷ He describes his life as ‘irredeemably corrupt’ and unjustifiable, not being able to change the life of the poor, possessing no power over capitalism and injustice in the world. The soliloquy immediately refers back to the luxury of the hotel room where the audience members are comfortably seated, which arouses unnerving discomfort.⁸ *Black Tonic* (2008 and 2015) by a Birmingham-based company, The Other Way Works, takes the audience across the building of the hotel in which it is set, exploring both public and private sides of the

use the term ‘One-to-One’ to refer to the type of performance that corresponds to Zerihan’s definition, although the preferred term depends on practitioners.

Rachel Zerihan and others, *Live Art Development Agency Study Room Guide on One to One Performance*, Live Art Development Agency Study Room (Live Art Development Agency, 2009) <<http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/catalogue/rachel-zerihans-study-room-guide>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

⁵ Dominic Cavendish, ‘Above and Beyond, Corinthia Hotel, London, Review’, *The Telegraph*, 22 March 2013 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9948887/Above-and-Beyond-Corinthia-Hotel-London-review.html>> [accessed 1st April 2016]. *Above and Beyond* by Look Left Look Right is premiered in 2013 at the Corinthia Hotel, London.

⁶ Lyn Gardner, ‘Above and Beyond – Review’, *The Guardian*, 24 March 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/mar/24/above-and-beyond-review>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

⁷ Wallace Shawn, *The Fever*, 1990 <<http://www.wischik.com/lu/senses/fever.html>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

⁸ Lyn Gardner, ‘The Fever Review – Grappling with Privilege and Guilt in a Mayfair Hotel’, *The Guardian*, 18 January 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jan/18/the-fever-review-grappling-with-privilege-and-guilt-in-a-mayfair-hotel>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

hotel, following a thriller story. Describing this production, Rosemary Waugh writes that ‘the beauty of this staging is reliant on hotels being the true owners of the phrase, “the truth is always stranger than fiction”’.⁹ Indeed, it is a series of ambivalent attributes which hotels inherently possess – public and private, anonymity and intimacy, homeliness and temporariness, hospitality and restlessness – that gives hotels the potential to be spaces which evoke a multitude of possible narratives.

This paper discusses how the evocative implications that a hotel building inherently possesses may be illuminated by a performative act within the space, using *The Armour* (2015) by Defibrillator Theatre and *The Magical Number Seven* (2011) by David Rosenberg with Hannah Ringham.¹⁰ I draw on my own audience experience of these two pieces of work to support the argument that when a hotel as a locale is usefully employed, the life of the hotel and the lives temporarily residing it meaningfully become a part of the performance, functioning as ‘paratextual’ elements to the ‘text’ of the performance.

‘Site-specific’ and a paratextual approach

The Armour (2015) by Defibrillator Theatre was produced especially for the 150th Anniversary of the Langham Hotel in London and is defined by the company as ‘a *site-specific* drama about the lasting and changing effects of empire’ (my italics).¹¹ This piece is written for this particular hotel and has been performed only in this location to this date; therefore, it is safe to say that it is a ‘site-specific’ production.

⁹ Rosemary Waugh, ‘Black Tonic (Review)’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 2015

<<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/black-tonic/>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

¹⁰ Defibrillator Theatre, *The Armour* at the Langham Hotel, London. Attended on 7th March 2015.

David Rosenberg with Hannah Ringham, *The Magical Number Seven*, presented as part of One-on-One Festival at Battersea Arts Centre. Attended on 2nd April 2011.

¹¹ ‘The Armour’, *Defibrillator Theatre Website*, 2014 <<http://www.defibrillatortheatre.com/the-1865-project/>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

However, other works which take place in hotels may be toured, changing their locations to one of many other hotels. This is possible since one of the attributes hotels share in general is their repetitive pattern within the building, and the anonymity by which traces of a guest are smoothed away daily. The appropriateness of site-specificity as a descriptor may become problematic in such cases.

The term ‘site-specific’, according to Fiona Wilkie, entered the theatrical terminology in the latter half of 1980s and has been commonly used in newspaper reviews since the late 1990s.¹² To what extent a work should be specifically bound to a single site in order to qualify as ‘site-specific’ has been disputed by practitioners and scholars ever since. In 2008 Andy Field expressed frustration that the term is often used to indicate any performance piece set outside of purpose-built theatre buildings.¹³ Field is disapproving of the uncritical use of the term ‘site-specific’ as subsuming a variety of experimental theatre forms under the label of ‘another new-fangled and eminently bracketable novelty act’. Other terms such as ‘site-generic’ by Wright & Site¹⁴, as well as ‘site-responsive’ and ‘site-sympathetic’, are sometimes used to indicate less strict site-specificity: these tend to describe a work which has adapted itself to a certain type of space it currently occupies, yet which has flexibility to be relocated to and re-contextualised in another space. For example, the theatre critic, Catherine Love, described *Walking: Holding* by Glasgow-based artist Rosana Cade as ‘site-responsive’, since the piece is re-contextualised from city to city, performed ‘with different local performers, reconfigured each time to slot into its new

¹² Fiona Wilkie, ‘Mapping the Terrain: A Survey of Site-Specific Performance in Britain’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18.2 (2002), 140–60 (141) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X02000234>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

¹³ Andy Field, “‘Site-Specific Theatre’? Please Be More Specific”, *The Guardian*, 6th February 2008 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/feb/06/sitespecifictheatrepleasebe>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

¹⁴ Wilkie, ‘Mapping the Terrain’, p.150.

urban context'.¹⁵ This work has been toured nationally and internationally since 2011 and the essence of the piece remains unchanged wherever it has been taken: an audience of one has a half-an-hour walk in a city, holding hands with a series of performer participants. It also has specific elements of the cities that the artist incorporates into the route, such as reflective surfaces, graffiti and landmarks like pubs and churches. While maintaining the structure, this performance piece adapts itself to the geography and the dynamic of the urban landscape of a city where it is performed. This paper, amongst a variety of specific sites performance may take place and respond to, specifically discusses the hotel as a locale of performance. The intriguing rise in popularity of hotels as performance venues in recent years has been observed by reviewers, yet the unique allure and evocative qualities which the environment of a functioning hotel lends to a performance have not been analysed in detail.¹⁶

Michel de Certeau, in his reflection on the differences between 'place' and 'space', compares them to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic concepts of *langue* and

¹⁵ Catherine Love, 'The Reimagined Flâneur', *Catherine Love* (blog), posted on 28th January 2014 <<http://catherinelove.co.uk/2014/01/28/the-reimagined-flaneur/>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

¹⁶ Susannah Clapp opens her review for *The Armour* (2015) for *The Observer* by saying, 'Hotels are having a theatrical moment'; while Fiona Mountford noted that there is 'a growing sub-genre of site-specific plays set in hotels'. Dominic Cavendish states in his review of *The Hotel Plays* (2014), which sets in the Langham Hotel, that 'if you want to get a good measure of plush London hotels without staying in them, theatre is proving almost a better bet than a site like TripAdvisor'. In response to the opening of *The Hotel Plays*, *The Guardian* collated photographic images from theatre productions which took inspiration from 'the limbo of a hotel room'.

Susannah Clapp, 'The Armour Review – No Linking Narrative, Too Much Corridor Carpet', *The Observer*, 15 March 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/15/the-armour-review-hannah-spearritt-ben-ellis-langam-hotel-london>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

Fiona Mountford, 'The Armour, Langham Hotel - Theatre Review', *Evening Standard*, 11 March 2015 <<http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/the-armour-langham-hotel-theatre-review-10101107.html>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

Dominic Cavendish, 'The Hotel Plays, The Langham, Review', *The Telegraph*, 21 February 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10653655/The-Hotel-Plays-The-Langham-review.html>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

'Hotel Plays, from Noël Coward to Sarah Kane – in Pictures', *The Guardian*, 19 February 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/gallery/2014/feb/19/hotel-plays-noel-coward-sarah-kane-tennessee-williams-pictures>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

parole. While ‘place’ is static and governed by rules and systems to make sense as in *langue*, according to de Certeau, ‘[s]pace occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities’ as in *parole*.¹⁷ De Certeau summarises:

[...] *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text; i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs.¹⁸

In *Site-specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, Nick Kaye elaborates this point further, stating that ‘[s]pace, as *a practiced place*, admits of unpredictability. [...] space might be subject not only to transformation, but ambiguity’.¹⁹ This leads us to one explanation which underpins the productivity of functioning hotels as performance sites. Hotels, by their nature, possess an inherently transient nature which anticipates guests’ departure as soon as they arrive. Hotel buildings as a structured ‘place’ with a system and a set of rules becoming a ‘space’ as it is practiced – as the traffic of people flows and as the hotel guests inhabit the building. When a performative act – another ‘practice’ of the place – takes place, this transient nature and ambiguity is highlighted even more clearly.

In her reflection on site-specific performance practice, Wilkie points out the difficulty in identifying the boundary of the performance site, referring to the way a theatre company, Walk the Plank, works.²⁰ This company tours in their ship, where

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall, Paperback (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1988), p.117. Originally published in 1984.

¹⁸ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.117. Italics in original.

¹⁹ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.5.

²⁰ Wilkie, ‘Mapping the Terrain’, p. 151.

their 'site-specific' performance takes place, taking it to the docks on the seaside across the country. In this case, is the site limited within the ship, or does it include the docks and their surroundings too? This question about the boundary of performance sites can be extended to the performance in a hotel space and it prompts another question about the boundary of performance texts and the parameters of the audience experience. I argue that it is the slippage of the life and reality of hotels into the fictional performance that embellishes the audience experience in functioning hotels, and that a paratextual approach is a useful analytical tool to discuss this permeability. What a performance within functioning hotels gains from the site functions as paratextual elements and influences the audience's reading of the performance text. Paratextuality, a concept established by Gérard Genette, gives the vocabulary to analyse the influence of marginal and subordinate elements of the text in the interpretation of the body of text.²¹ Preface, epigraph, chapter titles, footnotes and such paratextual elements at the periphery of the text exert subtle influence upon the reading of the text. An application of a paratextual approach to theatrical performance enables us to redefine what is the 'text' of performance and reassess the parameters of the performance text of a given work. This concept is particularly productive in discussing the performance work whose narrative and presentation are inevitably permeated by another layer of meanings brought by the locale. I argue that functioning hotels as sites render their own attributes to the performative acts inhabiting their space and usefully complicate the performance text; and this relationship is sometimes exploited by theatrical events which create a pseudo-hotel space.

²¹ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Intersection between the imagined hotel and the actual hotel: *The Armour*

The Armour (2015) by Defibrillator Theatre is a triptych of playlets set in the Langham Hotel in London, ‘Europe’s first “Grand Hotel”’.²² Written by Ben Ellis as the writer-in-residence at the hotel, this play takes the audience to three separate rooms in the hotel building, tracing back the hotel’s hundred-and-fifty years of history through three scenes that are set in three different time periods: the present; 1973; and 1871. A small group of the audience is firstly invited to the private bar in the basement to witness a young pop diva hesitating to make a comeback and her manager coaxing her back to the stage. The second part takes place in a hotel room several flights up, where a young American couple is waiting to be interviewed by BBC who used the Langham Hotel then in the 1970s as ‘recording studios, storage and the BBC Club’.²³ In the final act, the audience find themselves in a heavily transformed hotel room inhabited by Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie, where the sense of time has drifted away, dissolving the present and the memory of the now gone empire all together. All three playlets capture a critical moment between two people during a transient sojourn at this very hotel. A jacket, which appears in all three scenes, operates as a thread to unite the three narratives together, representing a potential way out from the situation of the characters. The jacket is ‘the armour’ for the characters to exit from the hesitant moment they experience within the seclusion of the hotel. The use of non-theatre spaces for a theatrical performance has become less of a novelty in recent years for the theatre audience, as an increasing number of productions invite their audiences to unconventional venues outside of purpose-built theatres. It is no longer a specialty of site-specific or promenade performance

²² ‘The Armour’, *Defibrillator Theatre Website*, 2014.

²³ ‘The Armour’, *Defibrillator Theatre Website*, 2014.

productions to take the audience to sites which serve or have previously served a particular purpose; for example, a Shakespearean production of *Macbeth* (2013) at Manchester International Festival was staged in a deconsecrated church. Such productions taking place in ‘unusual’ settings are often described as ‘events’, indicating their potential appeal to a broader demographic than regular theatregoers. James Hiller, the Artistic Director of Defibrillator Theatre, considers such wider spectatorship the activity of ‘cultural nomads’, who take interest in ‘festivals and gigs, and who want adventure and discovery’.²⁴ Therefore, the hotel as a site for *The Armour* may function as a magnet to attract such spectators in addition to being a source of inspiration for the writer-in-residence who was commissioned to produce this work for the anniversary of the hotel. *The Armour* takes the audience members across the hotel building of the Langham as everyday business takes place, while each of the three scenes is set in the seclusion of a private bar and hotel rooms concealed from the eyes of non-audience, leading the spectators to different corners of the building through staircases and corridors. Some reviewers, however, remain unconvinced by the use of the space of this production. Susannah Clapp, in her review for *the Guardian*, states that ‘[t]he Langham seems to have occasioned rather than inspired *The Armour*’, while Tom Wicker writing for *The Stage*, points to the lack of a ‘wider attempt to draw you into the hotels’ interconnected space’.²⁵ The dismissiveness of these views may have been derived from the recent popularity of hotels as performance venue. For these reviewers’ eyes, a hotel as a performance space may have seemed no more than a gimmick that has already been used by other

²⁴ Becky Brewis, ‘James Hillier on Directing Site-Specific Theatre’, *Ideas Tap*, 2014
<<http://www.ideastap.com/ideasmag/the-knowledge/james-hillier-directing-site-specific-theatre>>
[accessed 1st April 2016].

²⁵ Clapp, ‘The Armour Review – No Linking Narrative, Too Much Corridor Carpet’.
Tom Wicker, ‘The Armour, Review’, *The Stage*, March 2015
<<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/armour/>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

productions. However, I argue that this production provides a good example of what performance in functioning hotels may draw out from the site, such as the passage to the site, the life of the hotels, and the physical structure of the hotel buildings. The complexity of the site functions as paratextual elements, informing the performance text and enriching the audience experience.

Grand hotels such as the Langham have their own characters: a long history and luxurious offerings are out of the ordinary for most audience members attending the show. In her review of the Almeida Theatre production of *The Fever*, Gardner ensures that '[y]ou [as audience members] have a right to be here' at the May Fair Hotel, which in turn implies the audience members perhaps do not belong to the luxurious hotel otherwise.²⁶ Such alienation from the space resonates with one of the contradictory dichotomies hotels inherently possess. That is, they welcome arriving customers with hospitality like 'home', whilst anticipating that the stay will only be temporary and that the travelling customers will leave at some point. The relationship between the space and the ephemeral performative act which resides within the space of site-specific performance has been described using the terms 'host' and 'ghost'. Cathy Turner, referring to the practitioners who rationalise this idea such as Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas, summarises that in site-specific performance, '[t]he "ghost" of the superimposed structure occupies the "host" site'.²⁷ The term 'ghost', Turner states, embraces not only a physical structure occupying a given space, but also 'the events, narratives, and performances arising from these structures and the spaces they present'.²⁸ The performance as 'ghost' haunts the space as 'host', which is

²⁶ Gardner, 'The Fever Review – Grappling with Privilege and Guilt in a Mayfair Hotel.'

²⁷ Cathy Turner, 'Palimpsest or Potential Space? Finding a Vocabulary for Site-Specific Performance', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 20.04 (2004), 373–90 (374)
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X04000259>> [accessed 1st April 2016].

²⁸ Turner, 'Palimpsest or Potential Space? Finding a Vocabulary for Site-Specific Performance', p.374.

then witnessed by the audience members. An analogy akin to this is drawn by writer Joanna Walsh in her meditative essay on hotels, entitled 'Hotel Haunting'. Ever-changing faces of guests are compared to 'ghosts' who temporarily haunt the building.²⁹ The chambermaids are described as '[o]ther ghosts with passkeys' who make an entry to the rooms unannounced, leaving subtle traces of their existence by smoothing away the clutter of the rooms. Walsh also says: 'A ghost erases the present by repeating the actions of the past. That's what haunting is.'³⁰ The past repeatedly replayed upon the present disturbs the present and its witness. When functioning hotels in which everyday business is continued as normal are taken as a venue of theatrical performance, they become doubly haunted: the transient relationship between hotels ('host') and their temporary visitors who reside within ('ghost') is further highlighted by the presence of another set of 'ghosts', or the performance and the audience brought by it. Spectators are indeed the witnesses of the performance acts ('ghosts') haunting the site ('host'), but at the same time, they become the ghostly haunting themselves, only temporarily occupying the hotel space as the performance arises.

In the production of *The Armour*, the performance in a way has already started from the point at which the audience embarked on the journey to the hotel. Spectator expectations of the show are aroused as the audience approaches the Langham Hotel, since it is not only an unusual destination for a theatrical performance but also unlikely to be a regular place to call at in their daily lives. The idea of going to an expensive hotel itself, operates as a paratextual element, feeding into the sense of an evening of spectacle but with a difference. On their arrival at the Langham, the audience members are asked to wait in the foyer for the show to start. A signboard

²⁹ Walsh, 'Hotel Haunting', *Hotel*, p.12.

³⁰ Walsh, 'Hotel Haunting', *Hotel*, p.12.

which carries the title of the show, a member of staff who does the ‘check in’ for the audience, an usher smartly dressed as a waitperson and the audience members who stand around at corners blend into the hubbub which already fills the evening at the hotel. The main entrance of the hotel which connects the inside to the outside also functions as a hub for any traffic of people within the hotel. It leads to the reception, the restaurants, the lounge, the function rooms and the numerous guest rooms via lifts and staircases. As they wait, the audience soon notices the everyday businesses of the hotels going on around them, almost oblivious of the theatre spectators’ presence. The everyday acts at the hotel themselves are highly performative as they follow the code of conduct and routines of the hotel, which already contributes to the blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction. It prepares the audience for the show which is about to start, making them aware of the premises in which the performance unfolds, enhancing their anticipation.

Those with heightened awareness start to notice subtle behaviours of people in the hotel, paying attention to minor incidents they happen to witness. On the evening I attended the performance, there was a wedding, perhaps Indian, happening in the hotel. At one point, a well-dressed man, raising his voice in anger, was dragged across the foyer by a couple of formally dressed men. This was followed by a woman in a decorative dress, which I imagined to be an Indian wedding garment, sobbing and walking out from the same place as the angry man did, accompanied by another woman. This brief incident drew attention of some people, yet it did not exceed the general noise of the hotel foyer and went mostly unnoticed. It was surely happenstance, is never repeated on any other night and not related at all to the theatrical performance that followed. Nevertheless, however minor or irrelevant an incident might be, it can contribute as a paratext to a meaning-making process within

an audience experience which has effectively already begun. The production of *The Armour* welcomes extra layers of narratives to complicate the audience experience of the evening, by leaving the audience exposed to the ongoing business of the hotel. As the theatre audiences are introduced to the hotel space, they are given an opportunity to observe the environment and perhaps to have an insight into the premise of the hotel where public and private intersect.

A conscious effort by the production to complicate the reality and the fiction is also introduced at the beginning of the first act, whereby a chambermaid with a vacuum cleaner briefly enters the performance space 'by mistake', shortly after the entrance of the actor in the role of manager. The sequence was evidently staged and embedded deliberately in the performance text, given that it was on an evening, when cleaning would not normally take place. This impression is further supported by the fact that the actor interacted with her whilst the audience members are treated unseen by the performers. This, therefore, can be read as a gesture towards the anonymous aspect of the hotel, whereby members of staff often remain unseen, and what happens behind the doors remains unspoken. Both coincidental occurrences witnessed in the hotel space and the staged action to complicate the reality and fiction serve as paratextual elements, preparing the audience for three different scenes from different time of the history, scattered across the hotel building.

Being a grand hotel with a large capacity, the building of the Langham possesses identical sets of guest rooms across many floors. Such repetitive physical structures, along with actions and figures that are present in the hotel space, themselves reinforcing routines and behavioural patterns, render a particular characteristic to the hotel space, which in turn adds an extra layer of meaning to the performative act within. The size of the site seems to have worked against some of the

critics, as Clapp says that the audience ‘sees all too much corridor carpet’, criticising the lack of ‘linking narrative’ except for a piece of garment as a symbol of departure and freedom which repeatedly appears in all three scenes.³¹ What the audience sees while travelling up and down through the corridors, staircases and the lift for the next scene is a quiet part of the hotel, in contrast to the foyer, where the constant traffic of people is observed. The reality of the life in the actual hotel which punctuates at every scene break might seem disillusioning considering the interconnectivity of three different narratives. However, the seemingly tedious intermissions are inseparable from the hotel building, offering their own meaning to the event. Corridors with a series of closed doors, repeated floor after floor, on which even residents might get lost without referring to the floor number, hint at the anonymity of hotel rooms. The view of identical hotel corridors and carpets implies the multiplicity of the drama unfolding behind all those doors, quietly lining the corridor. Such repetitive physical structure suggests that each room potentially contains equally intense drama as the ones the audience members are witnessing throughout the evening. By physically superimposing three narratives that are set in the very hotel over the actual hotel building, *The Armour* is not only left open for the slippage of real life into the audience experience, but also intriguingly highlights the potential of the hotel space as a locale of fictional narratives.

Pseudo-hotel space: *The Magical Number Seven*

The Magical Number Seven by David Rosenberg with Hannah Ringham was presented as part of the second One-on-One Festival at Battersea Arts Centre in 2011. The festival offered ten types of ‘menus’ or tickets, each of which took an audience

³¹ Clapp, ‘The Armour Review – No Linking Narrative, Too Much Corridor Carpet’.

member to a journey of three different One-to-One performances taking place across the building. *The Magical Number Seven* invites an audience member to the basement where an usher awaits at a make-shift reception area. The audience member is asked to leave their belongings and handed a card key for the room. It soon becomes clear that the card key is a mere prop without an actual function to unlock the door, as the audience attempts to insert it to the door. The already unlocked door opens inside a room which is immaculately designed as a spacious double room of the kind you might find in any quality hotel in any city. The mise-en-scène is understated, providing a room that is recognisably a hotel room, yet without any particular character. As the audience steps further into the room, they will find a performer, Ringham, next to the bed at a blind spot from the doorway. Ringham, with a meaningful half-smile, leaves the room shortly, with an unsettling piece of advice to lock the door behind them. As they leave, the audience notices that there are more bolts on the door than are likely for a hotel room. The ten minutes that follow are full of dreamlike surreal events: the audience may explore the room to find a chest of drawers filled with sand or encounter a series of blackouts and sudden appearances of the performer despite the tightly locked door. At the end, the audience is gently ushered out of the room by Ringham without a word. The audience member is always aware that the room is artificially constructed in the manner of a hotel room, and that there is no genuine everyday business of a hotel surrounding the performance space. Nevertheless, *The Magical Number Seven* skilfully captures the unique quality of hotel rooms: claustrophobic isolation and the unsettling quality of being in an anonymous room as a stranger.

Solitary audience experience plays a key role as a paratextual element in the quality of hotel space captured by *The Magical Number Seven*. The collective

audience experience offered by *The Armour* implicitly arouses within each spectator the awareness of being a part of a group. The audiences of *The Armour* travel across the hotel building as a group of about thirty, guided by an usher, either through carpeted staircases or by lift. The usher asks the audience to leave no space in the seats in each of the three rooms and ensures that the audience is not interfering with a spot in the room where the performance takes place. The huddled together audience may feel absorbed in the narrative; yet there is certainly a hint of solidarity, being a part of a group which accepts the role as silent viewers. In *The Magical Number Seven*, in contrast, the audience member is well aware of their isolation. This is partly because this work is presented in the context of One-on-One Festival, but also because of the blurb on the brochure which underlines such anticipation:

Kindly fill out your particulars in this register and sign. Here is the key, you must lock the room when going out. This porter will carry your luggage to your room. If you need any private services please ring the bell phone and the bearer will attend to your needs.

Welcome. Do not stay longer than 10 minutes.³²

The blurb, which resembles the generic instructions given at the hotel reception on checking in, clearly informs the audience that the title, *The Magical Number Seven*, indicates a room number of a hotel. A series of gestures – checking in luggage, receiving a key – which take place before the entrance to the room also reinforces the expectation of the audience member being on her own in a hotel room. A hotel room is supposed to be a private space in which one can unwind, with privacy maintained. Here, the blurb and a series of gestures function as paratextual elements, gradually accumulated to direct the audience to an impression that the audience member should

³² Battersea Arts Centre, 'One-on-One Festival: What's Your Taste?', 2011
<https://issuu.com/battersea_arts_centre/docs/1on1_finalx_web> [accessed 1st April 2016].

be a single and only person in a room as a hotel guest. It is this preconception slowly built up beforehand that makes the subversion of the promised security and privacy vivid. Once the audience member enters the room, unexpectedly finding a previous visitor and then being left alone, the audience finds herself in a heavily bolted 'hotel room that takes on a life of its own' in unease and bizarreness.³³ In this piece, the isolation of the audience engenders the expectation for a hotel room experience within the audience member, which paratextual information is then overthrown on entering the performance space. When the implied privacy and seclusion in a room is disrupted by the intimate and unnerving presence of the performer, that is, when the anticipation supported by a series of paratextual information is subverted, insecurity prevails. There exists no boundary between the real life and the fictional narrative in the case of the performance in pseudo-hotel space; however, the anticipation set up through the paratextual information given before the performance and the close resemblance of the performance space to an actual hotel room replicate the hotel experience within the ten-minute performative act, leaving the spectator in the midst of the unsettling anonymity of a faceless hotel room.

Conclusion: Hotel plays itself out

Site-specific performances in hotels – whether in functioning hotels or a carefully constructed pseudo-hotel space – have almost grown into a sub-genre in contemporary theatre practice. This is in a sense unsurprising, given the wider context in which site-specific theatre productions find their inspiration from genuine locations in an attempt to enrich and extend audience experience. Site-specific locations

³³ Lyn Gardner, 'One-on-One Festival – Review', *The Guardian*, 1st April 2011
<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/apr/01/one-on-one-festival-review>> [accessed 31st March 2016].

compliment and reinforce the performance taking place within, although the relationship between the site and the performance may vary greatly. Some performances may mimic the pre-existing activities and the themes in the place, embracing them within the performance; whilst others highlight the contrast between the site and the performance, creating dissonance between them. As seen in the example of *The Armour*, a functioning hotel as a performance venue encourages a different kind of engagement with the performance experience and it arguably complicates the performance text with the existing life of the hotel. When the performance set in a hotel is enacted in the very hotel space amidst ongoing everyday business, the audience experience becomes still more complex, with the performed hotel and the actual hotel endlessly reflecting one another, as if they were two mirrors set facing one another. Pseudo-hotel space can also draw out a unique quality of hotels by evoking a series of ambivalent attributes of hotels. *The Magical Number Seven* meaningfully plays with the anticipated privacy, security, and homeliness, which is later destabilised by the performance. In both examples, the hotel is not only exploited as a site that evokes a certain ambience such as glamour or anonymity; but the life in the hotel and its attributes paratextually permeate the boundary between reality and the fictional narrative, enriching the performance text and audience experience.