# **Scenographic Doing: Performance Making Partnerships and Design-led Collaboration**

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Theatre is a form that happens in space and time, that unfolds in the transformative meeting of bodies, actions, ideas, and materials. In this vein, design for the theatre is, as Greer Crawley observes, ‘a form of alchemy’ in which, through ‘the processes of distillation and sublimation, experiment and experience, an exchange takes place: things materialise, vapourise, liquidise, solidify’ (2011: 15-16). This transformative alchemy offers both a mode of theatre making, grounded in the dynamism of materials and the affective capacities of constructed encounters, and a lens through which to understand performance. The theatre happens, and this *happening* draws together aesthetic and meaning-making practices in ways that are made especially vivid through scenography. Where once, performance design was underexplored, or dismissed as merely illustrative of meanings introduced elsewhere, scholarship in recent years has established the critical significance of scenography as a meaningful component of performance, worthy of further and deeper exploration.

To this end, this chapter argues that scenography can cultivate affective environments in which aesthetics and ethics are entwined, and will examine this entwining by exploring design led collaborations that highlight parallels between scenographic practice and questions of relationality and affectivity. In particular, this chapter seeks to locate scenography in a feminist context, arguing that scenographic practice and scholarship has much to offer to explorations of gender and feminism in performance. Susannah Henry’s (2022) ‘autoscenography’, for example, aligns with feminist methodological tools, acknowledging the role of the scenographer in the production of an embodied generative and reflective practice. Elsewhere, Rachel Hann (2022) has mobilised her concept of ‘scenographics’ to illuminate the disruption of normative gender identities in drag performance, and in so doing has highlighted rich opportunities for the expansion of scenography scholarship in relation to gender, an area that remains largely under-researched. By exploring connections between scenography and feminism, this chapter aims to respond to Elin Diamond’s call ‘that feminist theory, while remembering its roots in ideology critique, needs to locate agency across multiple bodies in unpredictable configurations’ (2017: 149). Concerned with dynamics at play in the nexus of the human and non-human, scenographic thinking invites understandings of multiple ways in which agency might operate in performance. Moreover, the practice of design for performance involves a number of complex layers of collaboration; among the artists involved, and across the confluence of bodies, objects and spaces in the meeting of performance and audience. Significantly, the agency of material objects in performance may both involve and exceed the labour and choices of designers, as materials themselves become active participants in the exchange of live performance, pointing to a plurality of meaning making that is contingent, processual and always in flux.

Accordingly, the work of design(ers) warrants more fulsome consideration in relation to collaborative practices than is currently available in subject literature, particularly in relation to feminist theatre making. Scholarly explorations of feminist theatre have rarely considered scenography in depth, and have tended towards a rather parenthetical consideration of designers (Syssoyeva and Proudfit 2016, Goodman and DeGay 1998). While feminist thinkers have explored the work of women playwrights, considering, for example, the ways in which their plays might manifest a kind of feminist politics (Aston 2003) and examining the, often gendered, politics of their production (Angel-Perez and Rousseau 2023), designers have not yet been fully represented in these conversations. Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart’s (2016) mapping of women and devising in contemporary UK theatre unveils significant multiplicity in approaches to collective creation by women artists, including a trend towards an uncoupling of representation and feminism in how the artists surveyed conceived of their work. While they engaged with a wide range of makers and artists, no designers were named among their participants. As this chapter aims to show, designers, too, can be generative artists of the theatre.

In what follows, I will outline some of the ways in which scenography explores questions of relationality, affect, and collaboration before turning to two performance examples. The first of these is *The Song Project,* co-created by the designer Chloe Lamford, in which Lamford’s design practice cultivates affective modes of performance in both process and production. Second, I turn to RashDash theatre company, and their collaboration with the lighting designer Katharine Williams, arguing that Williams’ politically inflected approach to design, coupled with the particular materiality of light creates a scenographic language that is explicitly and directly feminist in its own right. These projects both emerge in women-led contexts; all nine of *The Song Project*’s core artists were women, and these identities were reflected through the production’s themes ‘mostly drawn from female lived experience’ (Radosavljević 2021). Written and directed by women-identified artists, *Hole* explicitly and directly addressed experiences of women living in, and rebelling against, patriarchy. I aim to apply a scenographic analysis in feminist terms to *The Song Project,* and to use scenographic thinking to illuminate the role of materials in the already explicitly feminist production of *Hole.* In this latter example, it is also important to note that I am exploring the work of the project’s lighting designer, Katharine Williams, who is a non-binary feminist light artist, so I am careful here to explore the ways in which feminist thinking manifests in design practice without collapsing feminism and the female.

The analysis of these case studies seeks to recognize that affectivity in the theatre is both something that emerges in the experiential confluence of phenomena in performance and something that is shaped in the collaborative practices of performance making. The analysis here is shaped by my own experience of attending to each of these performances. I do not mean to present my experience as a somehow universal or totalising view of either production. Rather, I mean to show that attending to scenography provides a productive lens with which to think through both the affectivity of performance materials and the multiplicity of meaning-making strands that are woven together in live performance.

## Scenography, scholarship and scenographic doing

Contemporary research on scenography invites ways of thinking about performance in which material, sensual, spatiotemporal and affective experience become key factors in the encounter between performance and audience. Scenography is an active force within performance, ‘a mode of encounter and exchange founded on spatial and material relations between bodies, objects and environments’ (McKinney and Palmer 2017: 2) and ‘a distinct strategy for how theatre happens’ (Hann 2019: 6). Scenography sustains multiple interactions between elements within space and calls attention to ‘the dynamic role played by seemingly inanimate places and things’ (Hannah and Harsløf 2008: 11). In this vein, much of the trajectory of scenographic scholarship has involved an evolution from an attempt to posit definitions of what scenography *is,* as in, for example, Pamela Howard’s pivotal *What is Scenography?* (2002), towards an exploration of what scenography *does* in performance (Hann 2019; McKinney and Palmer 2017).

For McKinney and Palmer, what scenography *does* in performance can be conceptualised through core concepts of relationality, affectivity, and materiality (2017: 8). Relationality they argue, offers a way of exploring how ‘scenography organizes spaces so that intersubjective or empathetic encounters, and, potentially, some re-imagining of existing social structures might take place’ (2017: 8). Scenographic relationality encompasses both ‘intersubjective, human encounters’ and ‘the way spectators might be positioned in relation to the natural and built environment’ (2017: 10). In this way, the potentiality of scenographic relationality remains slippery and contingent. While Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002) framing of relational aesthetics has been critiqued from a feminist perspective for its tendency towards universalising claims about the artist,[[1]](#endnote-1) the call to the particular textures and qualities of each encounter in scenographic analysis has the potential to resist this tendency. Addressing affectivity, McKinney and Palmer point to the ways in which scenography works on its audience; how the transformations of performance space(es) and materials operate on the senses, in ways that might be spectacular or subtle, and how this points to the phenomenological nature of scenographic experience. Finally, and in parallel with ideas of affectivity and relationality, McKinney and Palmer posit materiality as the third pillar of an expanded scenography. Here they highlight the ‘agentic capacities of performance materials and structures’ (2017: 12), and a concern with the ways in which materials might work in ways that exceed or disrupt human agency or intention. In this framing, McKinney and Palmer connect the project of scenographic analysis with ideas of new materialism, particularly the work of Jane Bennett and Karen Barad; thinkers who have also been influential in feminist performance scholarship in recent years.

Elsewhere in the same volume, drawing a conceptual line from cultural theorist Anne Balsamo’s writing about design to the specific materiality of scenography, Maike Bleeker observes that

Objects, spaces and materials are not recipients of pre-conceived meanings that are imposed on them through the design process. Rather, objects, spaces, bodies and other materials participate in processes in which they come to matter in the double sense observed by Judith Butler (1993): their concrete materialization is inseparable from how they come to signify. (Bleeker 2017: 125)

In this way, scenographic practice offers opportunities to explore the multiplicity of performance languages, in which the vitality of objects, to borrow Jane Bennett’s phrasing, can operate as a co-creator of meaning on the stage. As Bleeker argues, scenography operates as a kind of material thinking, offering modes of ‘thinking through matter’ (2017: 126) in both its practice, and in the ways that audiences engage with the work.

There is a conceptual parallel between developments in scenography scholarship, and the ‘affective turn’ observed elsewhere (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). Both the ‘scenographic turn’ (Collins and Aronson 2015) and the ‘affective turn’ are fundamentally concerned with what it is to engage with experiential phenomena, with what it is to pass in and through relations with forceful matter. Consideration of affect is also deployed by feminist performance scholars, where it ‘guides us to think of new forms of relationality conducive to exploring the many vectors of feeling aroused by performance’(Diamond, Varney and Amich 2017: 10). Scenography provides a rich lens through which to explore the affectivity of experiential phenomena in performance, because it involves both ‘the manipulation and orchestration of the performance environment’ (McKinney and Butterworth 2009: 4) and a consequential collaborative meeting of the material and the human in performance. Materials and objects may indeed perform with their own agency and vitality, but this does not negate the labour of the designers whose choices facilitate the very presence of those agentic materials. Nor does acknowledging the artistry of designers mean that materials are merely passive receptors of meaning. The creative labour of the designer, then, involves attunement to the felt potentialities of materials; sensitivity to the ways in which materials might operate on, and with, and through each other. As Hann argues, ‘the intangible affective qualities, or ‘affects’ of scenography are formative to all contemporary theatre-making’ (2019: 5). She argues that design practices constitute:

methods of orientating a body-event relationship that alters or crafts an encounter *with* place. To speak of orientation is to recognize the multiplicities of phenomena that situate bodies *within and with place,* oscillating between internal (symbolic, embodied) and external (experiential, proxemic) influences. A scenography of orientation is a scenography of feeling. (2009: 19)

This attention to feeling, and the understanding of scenographic practice as a crafting of affective atmospheres is a core facet of how scenography has come to be understood as ‘a way of doing, being and thinking’ (McKinney and Palmer 2017). This process can be both emotionally and politically charged in ways that point to the social and cultural capacities of scenography.

## Staging affect: *The Song Project*

*The Song Project* was initiated in 2019 by the stage and costume designer, Chloe Lamford, in collaboration with the Dutch musician, Wende Snijders. Lamford is an associate designer at The Royal Court, where the piece was developed and performed, and works across theatre, opera, music, and installation, in the UK and internationally.- As a performance designer, her work often creates dynamic performance spaces, in which design emerges as a distinct, and frequently playful, theatrical language. Design, for Lamford, ‘gives the play to the audience’ and becomes a means through which movement and space can ‘sculpt time’ (Williams 2023). This sense of playfulness manifests in the creation of *The Song Project*, which was conceived as an experiment in process, drawing together a collective of artists and playwrights to experiment with ways of co-creating work together. Led by a premise that ‘some things can only be sung’ the project involved the collaboration of composer Isobel Waller-Bridge, choreographer Imogen Knight, and five playwrights: E.V. Crowe, Sabrina Mahfouz, Somalia Nonyé Seaton, Stef Smith, Debris Stevenson. Following a work-in-progress performance in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, *The Song Project*  was ultimately performed in the intimate Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court in August 2021, when venues were starting to return to full capacity seating with the easing of Covid restrictions in England from July 2021. This context caused the piece to become, ‘a kind of communal event that happens to work also as a post-pandemic ritual of rebirth and regeneration’ (Radosavljević 2021). For this staging, Lamford directed the production, collaborating with designer Debbie Duru on the stage and costume designs that built from Lamford’s original 2019 design.

Figure 1 *The Song Project.* Photograph by Ali Wright, courtesy of Ali Wright.

The performance took the form of a song cycle, sitting somewhere between a concert and a theatrical performance, with the musicians and their instruments assembled in the centre of the stage, surrounded by plants nestled between and among the encircled pianos and other instruments, and with the audience surrounding on three sides. The singer, Wende, moved fluidly through this space, orienting and reorienting herself around the pianos with each song. This proximity between the audience and the performers fostered a sense of intimacy, made all the more acute in the knowledge that the production had been scheduled to be performed in the larger Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, but was moved to the Theatre Upstairs studio because of a flood.

The experiential and process-driven nature of the project meant that the piece emerged from a sense of collaborative exploration and experimentation. Speaking about the conception of the project, as a ‘a theatrical exploration of song writing for theatre’, Lamford notes that she and Wende ‘decided to work with playwrights in order to explore each song as if it’s a little scene in itself’ (The Royal Court 2019). Much of this process involved an attentive responsiveness to the material as it emerged. Lamford describes the development process as one of a cyclical distillation, of returning to each writer to build the lyrics further, ‘kind of building on the emotional idea of each song having its own feelings that’s transmitted through to the audience’ (The Royal Court 2019). While this was a collaborative process, shared across the creative team, I argue that Lamford’s performance design practice is especially significant. While Lamford’s work as a stage and costume designer might seem to be primarily concerned with the visual aspects of performance, performance design, as many artists and theorists have pointed out,[[2]](#endnote-2) extends far beyond a sense of the ocular centric and is often much more tied to sensation or emotion. For Lamford, design can be emotionally affective, and can ‘hold’ the audience as much as any other element in performance. ‘I design feeling’ she says ‘[that is] why I’m so obsessed with things moving, and the kinetics of a show, because time and space is choreographic’ (Trueman 2018). This kind of feeling work speaks to an attentiveness to atmospheres, emotions, sensations; a mode of creative labour that is distinctly affective and scenographic.

Lamford’s facilitative role on *The Song Project* and her background as a performance designer enabled a process of making that was characterized by an attentiveness to the ways in which emotions, sensations, and meanings might emerge through the material. As Wende discussed in terms of songwriting, part of this was a technical question, involving ways of engaging with rhythm and structure and stepping away from the directness of language, asking the writers to give her ‘space to sing it’ and to consider, ‘what does music do to a story? What can you leave out? It’s exciting to have theatre people talk about what is it if music is an actual component of your storytelling' (The Royal Court 2019). Wende’s invitation here is connected to a desire to co-create the meaning of each song through music, and through her voice; a distribution of meaning-making across all of the available modes of performance. I argue that this attentiveness to the capacities of each element of performance is a manifestly scenographic sensibility. Scenographic attentiveness relates to the material, spatial, and structural components of a constructed environment, or crafted encounter, but also, crucially, how these might intersect with dramaturgy and meaning making. A defining feature of design for performance is its imbrication with other performance elements. As stage designer Es Devlin writes, ‘I need a story here. Just saying “is it beige or is it brown?” I’m no more use to you than someone from the street. I don’t have an opinion about decoration’ (Williams 2015). The process of designing for performance is one that involves an alertness to multiple and contingent intersections of form and content.

In performance, the suite of songs moves through a number of themes and associations, circling around ideas of love, grief, relationships, and motherhood. Similarly, the aesthetic framing of the staging appears to be one of juxtaposition; placing the incongruously organic multitude of plants and foliage in the darkened space of a black box theatre, with Lee Curran’s lighting design flowing around the stage and featuring richly coloured fluorescent tubes, further entangling the artificial and the organic. The core impression of the design for this production, however, is one of subtlety. While the tone and the feeling of each song shifts, these changes are not manifested in dramatic changes of the physical space or mirrored in a flow of objects. Rather, this production builds its affect through the quiet cumulative power of its intimacy, becoming an example of the ways that McKinney and Palmer observe scenography can operate ‘gradually, over time, accumulating associations and meanings as the performance unfolds in a temporal as well as spatial dimension’ (2017: 11). Costume, for instance, is understated to a point that one review notes that the musicians ‘dress in what appears to be their own outfits’ (Bevan 2021). In fact, a connective thread seems to link Wende and the musicians to each other and the space through costume. The singer wears a green silk top, and a pale pink jacket printed with illustrations of tropical plant leaves, and dark trousers. The musicians each wear a plain coloured top, in faded variations of the colours present in Wende’s costume. There is subtlety, too, in the spatial organisation of the performance. While there is a choreographer on the core creative team, the performance is not danced, it is, rather, articulated in space, with each song offering a gradually different orientation in space as Wende moves through the stage. In this way, her performance is not only in her voice or in her musical renderings of the songs, but ‘her quiet magnetism is in her body too, drawing the eye of the audience around the stage relentlessly towards a meaningful closure’ (Radosavljević 2021).

The performance, then, provides an assemblage of affective materials and encounters. Following Sara Ahmed’s thinking through affect as ‘sticky’, that affect ‘is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects’ (2010: 29), the performance is cultivated through the orchestration of space and time provided by its materials, and in the intimate intersection of human and non-human. The materials of this performance are more ‘sticky’ than illustrative; even when there is an apparent overlap or correspondence between elements, each component of the piece sustains its own materiality in a way that opens up possibilities for the audience to forge connections and associations that emerge from the confluence of sensations. As an example, in the closing moments of the show, following a song the lyrics of which include the repeated line ‘it’s not light yet, but it’s getting there’, Wende opens the shutters at the rear wall of the stage, revealing the windows behind. While there is a clarity to the gesture, the composition of this moment allows for much more ambiguity in the experience. Audience members seated directly opposite the windows will have been able to see through the glass to the outside, those in the seating bank angled towards the opening of the shutters, will likely have experience the light from the windows growing as the gap before them widened each time a shutter was pulled back. For those on the opposite seating bank – as I was when I saw the performance – the protrusion of the physical shutter will have been more prominent than the recessed windows, at least until the shutters were fully open on their hinges. Rather than arriving at a shared or fixed image, then, each audience member, influenced by their position in the auditorium as well as their individual associations or sensibilities, will have experienced the opening of the windows in their own way. Moreover, the image nature of this gesture is contingent on a range of factors beyond the production’s control, not least the variable UK weather changing levels of brightness that might be seen through the windows on any given evening. Far from being a direct or fixed image, then, this moment is an example, perhaps, of what Ahmed calls ‘the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near’ (2010: 30). It is both an image that is grasped at alongside the song lyrics, and a grounded encounter with the materiality of the stage architecture.

Many of Lamford’s designs for performance operate through bold affective gestures. For *The Internet is Serious Business* (2014), for example, she created a ball pit into which characters could disappear, and from which characters could materialize. For *Atmen,* the Schaubühne production of Duncan Macmillan’s *Lungs* directed by Katie Mitchell*,* the actors pedalled bikes that powered the lights, rendering the play’s consideration of the climate crisis a palpably arduous task for the actors. While *The Song Project* is significantly smaller in scale, it is no less an example of affective potentialities coalescing through performance. Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that ephemeral design materials such as lighting and sound can operate at the ‘threshold of consciousness’ and that spectators exposed to shifts in these materials may ‘find their disposition changing frequently and abruptly without being able to consciously register, even less control these swings’ (2008: 119). This claim can be opened out to encompass the entire scenographic framing of this production, as the apparently understated use of costume and space affords the generation of affective encounters. As McKinney points out, the adoption of ideas of new materialism as applied to scenography paves the way for the development of a theory of a specifically ‘scenographic’ materialism, prompting questions about ‘the agency that scenographic materials might have above and beyond the meaning conferred on them by designers, playwrights, or performers’ (2019: 59). She argues that this scenographic materialism has implications for the understanding of the process, performance, and reception of live work. In this example, a materialist approach is woven through every stage of the work, from the collaborative process of its development, its performance as a kind of theatrical concert, and the ways in which the work is or might be experienced by its audience.

## Feminist light in the work of RashDash

Established in 2009, RashDash is a theatre company made up of Abbi Greenland, Helen Goalen, and (since 2017) Becky Wilkie. Their performance work collages text, movement, and music. *Two Man Show,* for instance,interweaves short narrative-driven scenes with explosions of physical action and music. The company’s values, as published on their website, speak to an imbrication of the political and the aesthetic, with a distinctly feminist approach:

We will DISMANTLE THE PATRIARCHY.

Make work with / /about / for people with different experiences of the world. People of different GENDER, RACE, SEXUALITY, CLASS, AGE and with different BODIES.

[…]

We will play with ARTFORM, FORM AND SPACE.

[…]

We make work WITH and FOR BODIES.

Make more space for SENSORY EXPERIENCE and SENSORY KNOWLEDGE. (RashDash n.d.)

While discussions about the company tend to focus on Greenland and Goalen’s performing and directing work (Waugh 2022; Rodríguez 2023), in this chapter I want to examine the company’s approach to sensory experience by exploring their collaboration with a particular designer, Katharine Williams. Williams is a non-binary artist, a lighting designer whose performance work is strongly imbued with a sense of feminist thinking and practice. They have collaborated frequently with RashDash as lighting designer for *Two Man Show* (2016); *The Darkest Corners* (2017); *Look at Me Don’t Look at Me* (2021); and *Oh Mother* (2022). Of this creative partnership, Williams says that the ‘collaboration we have together, and the light art that those conversations become, is what happens when lighting becomes a feminist character in each project’ (Williams 2023: 145)

To take a close look at one project in particular, in 2018 Williams lit *Hole* by Ellie Kendrick, at the Royal Court Theatre, directed by Helen Goalen and Abbi Greenland of RashDash. This is an explicitly feminist performance that questions systems of power and, as Verónica Rodríguez argues, explores ‘the repercussions of living in/with a woman’s body’ in the context of intersectional-based violence and abuse (2023: 35). Reviews of the production noted its ‘[r]age and frustration’ (Marlowe 2018); its ‘fury’ and its celebration of ‘female empowerment’ (Billington 2018); described it as ‘a bold, provocative rebel yell’ (Ludmon 2018); or summarized the performance as being ‘about female rage’ (Caird 2018). Simultaneously, if separately, reviews praised Williams’ lighting as ‘dazzling’ (Billington 2018); ‘phenomenal’ (Ludmon 2018), ‘brilliant’ (Marlowe 2018) and encompassing ‘witty interactions’ (Caird 2018). Though Jo Caird’s review acknowledged a connection between the light and the action, none of the reviews of this production gave space to consider the light, or indeed, any aspect of the production’s design, in relation to its politics. Similarly, Rodríguez focuses primarily on Kendrick’s work as playwright, leaving limited space to explore the performance of scenographic materials in the production. Addressing this lacuna, I am keen to dwell with this example further, to unpick the action and the agency of the light within this performance, arguing that scenography, and especially, light is a significant co-contributor of the production’s emergent meaning and politics. Here, I argue, Williams’ politically inflected approach to design, alongside their work with the peculiarly ephemeral and mercurial material of light creates a feminist performance language that is integral to the wider dramaturgy of this production, and in their work with RashDash more broadly. The feminist ideals at play are reflected in the content and structure of this production of *Hole*, but, crucially, are also evident in both Williams’ use of light and in their working practices. I mean to show that the use of light in this production is an active co-creator of the feminist politics of its performance, and Williams an integral collaborator.

The performance begins by introducing the six-person ensemble individually, in opening scenes that establish an apparently hostile, antagonistic relationship between the women and the stage world. One example of this from the opening moments of the production occurs as a woman moves into a spotlight, it is bright and clear against the surrounding darkness as she starts to speak: ‘I’m walking down the street at night and it’s dark and there’s a man…’ (Kendrick 2018: 11), but the light moves away from her. She runs after it, placing her face in its beam and starts over. Again, and slightly sooner than before, the light moves away, cutting her off. She persists, chasing after the light to restart her story. Over and over, she tries, and each time, in addition to moving away the light also contracts so that the lit space becomes smaller each time, forcing her to contort herself in increasingly uncomfortable ways. By the end of this sequence, she has to place her face on the floor to reach the last tiny patch of light.

This sort of sequence, of a rogue or misbehaving spotlight, borrows from tropes of clowning where similar devices are used to comedic effect – pointing, in those instances, to the artificiality of the theatrical machine, or some laughable ineptitude on the part of performer or lighting operator. Here, it is more sinister, the light is enacting a kind of power; enforcing structures and systems the women are forced to negotiate. In this scene, the woman chases after and contorts herself towards the light in apparently unanticipated ways; she is always chasing, always trying to claim space, but never in control. Thus, she experiences a continual misalignment between her actions and the theatrical environment in which she must act. The friction between the performer and the beam of light creates a divergence in orientation; a conflict with the apparent rules of the world around her that positions the woman as, in Ahmed’s (2010) terms, an ‘affect alien’. In this instance, light exerts control over the stage world and refuses the performer’s participation in it. Something deems the woman’s action to be ‘wrong’, without disclosing what might be ‘right’ in this context. Though her efforts are continually frustrated she persists, yielding physically to the light’s changing position but never altering the words she uses. This discrepancy of orientation between the human figure and the light invites a reading of the woman as an ‘affect alien’ in this stage world: ‘she refuses to share an orientation toward certain things as being good because she does not ﬁnd the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising’ (Ahmed 2010: 39).

What is established in the opening moments of *Hole* is a sense of rupture between the crafted environment of the performance world, and the women who populate this space. That light both provokes and sustains this sense of rupture is significant in terms of the political and the scenographic materiality of this performance. The distinct qualities of performance light lie in its transience, its slippery offers to perception, the proprioceptive ways in which it is experienced and its ability to transform the appearance of objects, bodies, spaces in its path. In its writing, the play is concerned with the gendered nature of what it is to be seen, and to be looked at, as when the women on stage recount the story of Medusa, ‘a woman who was too attractive to look at’ (Kendrick 2018: 30) and, in consequence was ‘turned into a monster’ as a ‘punishment’ for being raped (31), but who distilled from this punishment ‘the power to kill. To suck life out through a pair of eyes’ (32). The performance of light in this space attends to the gaze by forcing a negotiation of the constructed nature of the performance. I have argued elsewhere (Graham 2016) that stage lighting not only selects what is visible, but rather might be more productively thought of as *mediating* visibility. By this I mean that the constructed light of performance never neutrally reveals objects, bodies, or spaces, but is always already engaged in processes of transformation. In performance, and especially in this production of *Hole*,the relationship between looking and seeing is continually manipulated and disrupted by light, rendering the act of looking a vividly and physiologically felt experience. Later in the performance, for instance, a beam of white directed light returns to the space, working with a mirrored piece of costume, literally and figuratively reflecting the gaze back outwards (see Figure 2). ‘Looking is an act’ the text says. ‘Things know when you’re looking. Some things don’t like to be looked at’ (Kendrick 2018: 35). The interplay of light and costume here makes for a dazzling spectacle, at once a beautiful costume-light-body object, or assemblage, in Jane Bennett’s sense, and something that is physically difficult to look at.

Figure 2 *Hole.* Photograph by Richard Davenport, courtesy of The Other Richard.

This fluid sensory affectivity of light as a material, and the profound degrees to which it can impact on an audience’s felt experience of watching performance point to ways that light works to intertwine the material and the political, the aesthetic and the ethical. Joanne Zerdy and Marlis Schweitzer, for example, reflect on the ways that that the conditioning power of light was deployed in the National Socialist rallies in Nuremberg in the 1930s, where ‘the Cathedral of Light bound human participants through luminescence in an embodied declaration of national unity’ (2016: 6). Moreover, they argue, light in this instance was used to actively distract from the actual material bodies of ranks of soldiers who did not fit the picture of strength and power the Nazi party wanted to project; soldiers were “No longer visible as distinct individuals, the men’s disguised bodies merged with the flags, creating a potent assemblage of Nazi symbolism” (2016: 6). It is the very contingency of light, its capacity as an immaterial presence that can radically transform bodies and objects in its path that makes its practice blur the aesthetic and the ethical in profound ways.

Returning to the performance of *Hole,* then, it is also worth noting a turning point in the show, where something shifts and the relationship between the light and the performers ceases to be one of antagonism. The women, together, emerge from the physical hole sunken into the set and suddenly, the stage is awash with colour. It is now their space. They speak out to the audience, declaring the rules of the space: ‘We’re taking over. You came here to look. We’re giving you something to watch. We’re looking right back. We’re not interested in looking good for you’ (Kendrick 2018: 20).

Once more, the text here offers a direct challenge to the gaze, precipitated by a complete change in the quality of light. Where we began with the single, searching spotlight, picking individuals out against the darkness, now the whole space is held in richly coloured light. No one body is put forward here, the light is not working to direct the audience’s attention towards a particular body and no longer isolates the performers against the space. Rather, the space is held in light, and bodies in it move through shifting rhythms, patterns, and colours in a complete refiguring of the kind of atmospheres the performance began with. This holding of the space in light ceases to be about a mode of looking *at* the stage, and instead invites the audience to be present *with* the performers as the richly saturated light seeps out to fill the space and its glow permeates the auditorium The transformation afforded by light institutes a palpable change in how the women onstage inhabit this world. As Ahmed writes, feminism ‘is sensational’ (2017: 21) and the feminist body carries the memory of affects and invitations accumulated through experience. In the encounter with patriarchal violence, the ‘world is experienced as sensory intrusion’, felt as ‘a pressure’ (2017: 23). This pressure becomes a societal narrative of gendering that ‘operates in how bodies take up space’ (2017: 25) with women expected to accommodate, to take up little space. It is into this context that the script produces its declaration: ‘We are big. We take up space’ (Kendrick 2018: 17). Working in tandem with the text and the stage action, but in a specific register of its own, the light here not only shows a shift that grants the women onstage their power; it also *generates* this change. Light begins as a hostile material, rejecting the agency of the characters and holding them in isolation and under pressure. This same material then yields to the collective power of the ensemble of women, changing the world around them and becoming an exuberant celebration of their bodies in space. The rupture becomes the promise of rebuilding as Williams’ lighting gives the gift of radical feminist hope to the production. Of their process, Williams says:

As an artist, you create work through your own gaze. […] My gaze is one that has equality and feminism running right through it, so it stands to reason that feminism is a deeply infused part of any lighting design that I create. My light makes political decisions as it illuminates, points out, reveals, supports and lets go of things’. (Williams 2023: 153)

Through its contingency, light in performance becomes a paradigmatic site for exploring questions of the ethics of encounter. Thinking with light, is to grasp towards a shifting and uncertain target, to dwell in spaces of instability and compromise. In Williams’ work, the radical instability generated by this mercurial nature grants light the power to manifest a dramaturgy of rebellion, where all change becomes possible.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that scenography offers a way of understanding performance, but also that scenographic practice is an integral mode of collaborative theatre-making, and that that making can be politically inflected. The work of designers Chloe Lamford and Katharine Williams as well as the performances *The Song Project* and *Hole* discussed in this chapter have embraced a feminist politics in ways both implicit and explicit. Interestingly, though the examples discussed here were both performed in The Royal Court Theatre, a venue that frames itself as a writers’ theatre, each was, perhaps, positioned at the borders of conventional applications of text or language. For *The Song Project* ‘some things can only be sung’, and it is through music and the intimate orchestration of its materiality that the performance emerges. The production of *Hole* also employs music and song, in line with other work by RashDash, but as I have outlined, immaterial light becomes a significant and tangible feminist language in this performance. On this topic, Williams argues that light is an especially useful material in feminist theatre because ‘almost every element of the English language exists in the context of patriarchy and has been shaped by patriarchy, so sometimes there literally aren’t the words to tell a story outwith the patriarchal context’ but light enables the telling of ‘a different story’ (Williams 2023: 146). Perhaps the shared origin of these performances also calls to mind the literal meaning of scenography; from the Greek *skenographia,* or scenic writing. These examples present a kind of writing in space and time that highlights the affective imbrication of feeling and meaning in contemporary theatre making practice, and the ways in which scenographic practice constructs relational and affective encounters in performance. I hope that this chapter has shown some of the ways that the material thinking enabled by scenography (Bleeker 2017: 126) can enrich understandings about the multi-modal performance languages at play in feminist theatre. This also, importantly, positions designers as significant creators in the collaborative practice of performance making, whose contributions profoundly shape the ways in which performance negotiates relations between and among its constituents.

1. See for example, Reckitt 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For extended discussions of scenography beyond the visual see McKinney 2015; McKinney and Palmer 2017; Hann 2019; Graham 2020; Shyldkrot 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)