

## Dancing in public—Weekly Ticket Footscray

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### Abstract

This article describes a durational dance performance at Footscray Train Station, Melbourne, Australia, and the methods used to research and understand the relations created between performer and audience in this context. As performance dramaturg and researcher, I participate in each weekly performance, remaining open and mindful of the myriad disturbances and effects of a dance performance in a public space. I have become more and more interested in how audience and performer negotiate physical space and how this affects understandings and a sense of participation. I outline my background as artist and researcher in order to give a context to my understandings, and describe the performance, research methodology and my analysis of two different proxemic zones between performer and audience.

### Introduction

The next time you are in a busy public space—a shopping centre, sports ground or train station—I invite you to imagine—what if you saw someone dancing in the far distance? What if you saw an arm gently reaching up and carving an arc through the sky?

Or perhaps you have performed yourself for an unexpected audience in a public environment. Existing within a heightened awareness of your body in relation to others, what did you notice about your audience or yourself?

Weekly Ticket Footscray<sup>i</sup> is a weekly performance by dancer David Wells at Footscray Train Station in Melbourne. We began in 2016 and plan to finish 15 years later, in 2031. Other than pausing for eight months in 2020 during Melbourne’s COVID-19 lockdown, the performance continues ([www.weeklyticket.org](http://www.weeklyticket.org)).

In this article I describe this durational dance performance and the methods I use to research and understand the relations created by performer and audience. I outline my background as artist and researcher in order to give a context to my understandings, and describe the performance, research methodology and my analysis of two different proxemic zones between performer and audience. As performance dramaturg and researcher, I participate in each weekly performance,

remaining open and mindful of the myriad disturbances and effects of a dance performance in a public space. I take photos, write notes about what I see and hear, and interview David, audience members and participating artists. I have become more and more interested in how audience and performer negotiate physical space and how this affects understandings and a sense of participation.

## Research context

My interest in public performance comes from my experience as a performer, director and dramaturg working in non-traditional public spaces for the last 30 years, first in New Zealand, then Melbourne, and later touring throughout Europe, Colombia, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, China and Australia. The performance environments of this history are urban streets, outdoor plazas, schools, shopping precincts, sports venues, parties and cabaret venues. The audiences may come specifically to see performances or they might happen upon them unexpectedly, and they are always free of cost to the audience. Also, strong in my memory are the changing rooms inhabited directly prior to performances; these ranged from official theatre dressing rooms to public toilets, tents, mini vans, behind a low partition on the street, a large refrigerated meat safe in Hong Kong and a dusty half-built parking building in Bogotá with a crowd of thousands of people assembling in a plaza nearby. In 1994, I performed with the street theatre group ‘The Hunting Party’ in Canberra at the official government launch of Australia’s National Creative Nation Policy.<sup>ii</sup> As roving street theatre performers, we were considered an important element of the Australian arts ecology at this time.

I stumble on the terminology concerning which genre of performance best encompasses Weekly Ticket, as the term ‘street theatre’ is now no longer used in a contemporary context. I tend to use the descriptor of public performance rather than live art or site-specific performance. Though ‘live art’ is currently a common term for performance outside of a ‘black box’ space, this term has a genesis in the visual artists and whenever I hear it, I wonder how the opposite would appear—what would be ‘dead art’? The term “site dance” is used by practitioners and scholars (Barbour 2019; Hunter et al., 2019). Though Weekly Ticket could certainly be described as site dance, I have not drawn extensively on this scholarship or terminology for two reasons: firstly, my research has moved away from investigating ‘place’ or ‘site’ and has a focus on the complexity of participation, and secondly, my background in theatre and performance studies rather than dance means I have

drawn more from scholarship and practice from theatre and street performance in this practice-led research.

## **The genesis of Weekly Ticket Footscray**

The artistic team of Weekly Ticket are curators and artistic directors Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey, performer David Wells, and me as performance director and dramaturg. Weekly Ticket began in 2011 with Footscray Community Arts Centre calling for tenders for a public artwork at the station. Tim and Madeleine are “audio conceptual artists who create unexpected situations for listening. Their work is driven by a curiosity and questioning about sound in human culture” (Flynn & Humphrey, n.d.). Exploring the possibilities of working within the proposed budget, Tim and Madeleine considered the option of the maintenance allowance (for a sculpture) of \$12,000 becoming an artist’s wage, and the artist performing for the 15 years that a physical public object is designed to last. In effect, their key artistic provocation was “what if a public artwork was a performance artist?” They applied to create Weekly Ticket, but were unsuccessful due to funding structure changes at the time. Over the next seven years, funding possibilities arrived and vanished, and the station itself underwent major renovations and changed public transport providers. In February 2016, Weekly Ticket was finally able to start with a small seeding grant from the Australia Council of the Arts,<sup>iii</sup> in the ‘emerging and experimental’ category, and permission from Metro Trains was granted for a weekly performance schedule.

As the ‘Artist at the Station’, David carries a wooden chair and improvises: dancing, talking and creating performative moments with the commuters and staff at the station. He is present at the station on a weekly basis, for two hours.

## **Footscray Train Station – A brief description**

Footscray Train Station in Footscray, Melbourne is built on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and the Bunurong peoples of the Kulin Nation.<sup>iv</sup> It is a busy transport hub and is the sixth busiest station on Melbourne’s metropolitan network, with 3.767 million passenger movements recorded in the 2013/14 financial year (Victoria State Government, 2015). It has six platforms, and connecting the platforms is a long, covered overpass. The platforms themselves have waiting rooms and an old signal tower (currently not used) in the original red brick of 1859. Added to the historical architecture are new roof structures that create more shelter and match the modern

overpass. Situated next to a large fruit, vegetable and Asian produce market, Footscray Train Station is a collecting and moving point for local, urban and regional travellers in Victoria and wider Melbourne, and an environment that many shoppers walk through to get from one part of Footscray to the shopping precinct. The population of Footscray has historically been a place where new arrivals to Melbourne live, firstly Greek and Italian, then Vietnamese and now East African. In Footscray, 45 percent of people spoke a language other than English at home in 2016 (Maribyrnong City Council, n.d.). The Footscray Nicholson campus of Victoria University is also only 100 metres from the station, with many students moving through the station. Metro Trains currently have the contract to run the train system, with Public Transport Victoria (PTV) being responsible for transport infrastructure. There are several hundred CCTV cameras at Footscray Station and a staff of around 10 people. One cleaner moves constantly throughout the station, and two Metro employees generally wait at one of the busier ticket stiles where commuters touch on or off using their Myki cards (electronic tickets). Sometimes, a group of Metro employees moves through checking Myki cards. Inside the station, office staff assist commuters with buying tickets and questions, coordinate all passenger and train movements and monitor CCTV footage; there is also a staff kitchen and break room with a large TV screen that is set to Channel 7 (a fairly conservative commercial station).

Stories about Footscray sometimes describe the suburb as “Footscrazy”.<sup>v</sup> I spoke to one woman who was watching David across a platform at Footscray Station in September 2019, she stated: “He’s crazy. He’s definitely crazy. Well, it’s Footscray, isn’t it? There’s a lot of crazy people around here.” This descriptor comes from a commonly held perception that illegal drug use in Footscray is prevalent and leads to florid public behaviour, particularly in the centre of the shopping precinct close to the station. However, the suburb of Footscray and surrounding inner-western suburbs are becoming increasingly gentrified, and the station is currently surrounded by new high-rise apartment buildings that will greatly increase the population density of Footscray in the years to come. Many new ‘hipster’ style cafes and bars have been established in Footscray in the last five years, though Vietnamese and African restaurants are still the most numerous in the area. A common topic of conversation for David and older residents involves nostalgic recollections of how Footscray ‘used to be’, and David, as a local of 20 years,<sup>vi</sup> is able to participate in and instigate these types of conversations and stories, anchoring him more firmly as a ‘resident’.

## A dramaturgical research framework

As a member of the community of artists and audience created by Weekly Ticket, I have participated in close to 200 performances. This offers me a unique position as both artist and researcher for slow scholarship, as Bishop identifies, “Very few observers are in a position to take such an overview of long-term participatory projects: students and researchers are usually reliant on accounts provided by the artist, the curator, a handful of assistants, and if they are lucky, maybe some of the participants” (2012, p. 6). I have devised my own way of doing and understanding research; this has in turn informed both my research and artistic practice and required me to look critically and in detail at what I do, what I know and how this knowledge can be of use to others. This aligns with Carole Gray’s definition of practice-led research:

*Firstly [it is] research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly ... [it is where] the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray, 1996, cited in Haseman, 2007, p. 3)*

I am familiar with the artistic process of dramaturgy, which is used in many different contexts. But I more broadly understand dramaturgy as an outlook that seeks to understand creative practice in all its manifestations. David Williams, in his article ‘Geographies of requiredness: Notes on the dramaturg in collaborative devising’ (2010), outlines various descriptions or methodologies of dramaturgy but states that “they represent a heterogeneous aggregation of dispositions, propositions and questions about how one might live a creative life interwoven with others, rather than ever coalescing into a ‘method’ for making performances” (p. 197). As a practice-led researcher and immersed artist, my role is complex, as Williams describes: “The work [of the dramaturg] requires immersive belief and critical distance, a detailed engagement with part and whole, micro and macro; and she is forever both inside/outside, visible/invisible in the work” (2010, p. 202).

As my role as a dramaturg and researcher of Weekly Ticket has evolved over time, I have new understandings of how the micro elements of performance relate to macro understandings, often described using patterned metaphors, such as landscapes, branches, webs or networks. In this research, I analyse the specific activities David does at the station, moving between proxemic spaces and using the

skills he has gathered over time to invite the audience with gestures and conversations that create mutual play. My evolving understandings of Weekly Ticket has changed my perspective as an artist. I am less interested in manipulating specific performance gestures (by telling David exactly what to do), but now have more of a focus on paying attention to the overall macro landscape of the performance, making sure that Weekly Ticket remains playful, generous, responsive and sustainable. In fact, as I become more of an ‘expert’, I attend less to the specifics of what we are doing but think more about the wider necessity of sustaining creative activity. This corresponds to David Williams’ description of dramaturgy asking “questions about how one might live a creative life interwoven with others” (2010, p. 197).

### **Performer as dancer**

The improvisational movement style of Weekly Ticket lies within the realm of dance/physical theatre. Influenced by mime, clowning and mask performance, David is an example of the ‘non-conservatoire’ dancer that practitioners such as Merce Cunningham worked with, dancers without rigorous western ballet or contemporary dance training but with a strong sense of the expressive human body moving beyond the pedestrian. The dancing element of Weekly Ticket fulfils several functions. It puts David into a creative state, creating ‘explicit’ performance: “I pretend to do it, then I’m doing it. I physically knock myself into it [a creative state]” (interview with David, September 2017). Dancing also creates a disruption to the normal physical pattern of human activity at the station; it allows the audience to notice and participate in the performance from a distance, and it serves as an invitation to a closer audience interaction. In addition, dancing allows abstract expressions of joy and beauty, and David uses the gestures and rhythms of the stations, the trajectory of the trains, the waves of goodbye and arrival, the improvisational starting points of sitting, standing, running and carrying to create movement patterns. Over time, David has discovered movements that he enjoys doing; these include dancing with the chair in a rhythmic way, rocking it forwards and backwards, skipping and crouching with arms extended, carrying the chair in various ways. This ‘choreography’ is not made ‘onto’ his body by another (a common descriptor used by dancers who learn specific moves from a choreographer): it emerges from within and is an extension of movement patterns he has evolved over many decades as an improvising performer. As dramaturg, I recognise, describe and remind David what these evolving patterns and scores are, serving as an expert witness and collector of these performance materials. I also facilitate the process of working with

collaborating choreographers, such as Paea Leach, and document these experiments, for example, when Paea sent provocations for movement to David via mobile phone text.

In a discussion I recorded with Paea Leach and David after working together several times, Paea described dance as a “way of being in the world”. This echoes Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica, describing improvised dance as “a total expression of the self” (Bishop, 2006, p. 106). Both these descriptors concern dance being a total state of being, a more complex understanding than a person executing specific physical movements. Dance scholar and philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone describes a state of attentive responsiveness in improvised dance: “I am wondering the world directly, in movement ... the global dynamic world I am perceiving, including the ongoing kinaesthetically felt world of my own movement, is inseparable from the kinetic world in which I am moving” (2014, p. 201). The movement patterns created through improvisation are not completely random and unpredictable, as contemporary dance scholar Lawrence Louppe describes, “because the unpredictable is in fact highly determined by the history of the ‘me’ who improvises, and allows an already inscribed movement memory to appear” (2010, p. 52).

David’s dancing contains his life story; it is completely specific to him and utterly personal. As experimental choreographer Deborah Hay (2007) states, “History choreographs all of us, including dancers” (para 9). David’s body contains the memories and movements of the ‘70s dances he attended as a teenager, the gibbon monkey performances he did at Melbourne Zoo in the ‘80s, the decades of performing and improvising with companies such as ‘Born in a Taxi’ and solo indoor performances. He notes:

*What I’m bringing when I’m down there [at Footscray Train Station] is the young David Wells, and it is the very young David Wells the child, and I’m also bringing the father and the mentor and all the things I’m proud of being; the basketball coach, the old friend, the good friend, the life experience, coping with adversity that I’ve gone through. It’s made me more compassionate—the longevity that I’ve got in terms of being an artist and being a person for 56 years. (Interview with David April 2016)*

The following film clip records several movement patterns that have developed over time to become part of the repertoire of Weekly Ticket:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmSWvMSQOpE>

Here I describe specific movement patterns or scores recorded in the film:

Movement	Time stamp	Description of movement
1	0.26	Treating the chair like a circus prop, throwing it and catching it with control.
2	0.30	Standing on the chair and appearing above commuters, using arm gestures as if conducting the movement of the crowd and the trains.
3	0.39	Dancing next to the chair, responding to music through headphones, using extended arm gestures. Being more immersed in an internal world, the gaze is inward.
4	0.48	The gaze is outward, encouraging a more direct response from audience.
5	0.54	Spinning the chair.
6	0.59	A clear greeting, raising the hat.
7	1.02	In response to someone's curiosity, a playful gesture with the chair, a sense of direct relationship: "this movement is for you."
8	1.05	Responding to the architectural structure of the station, doors and walls.
9	1.12	Running alongside the train as it leaves the platform, visible to audience inside the train.
10	1.25	Sculptural images, epic poses.
11	1.32	Flipping and skipping with the chair in the overpass.
12	1.45	Initiating a handshake in response to an audience member who has stopped nearby; this is followed by a conversation.
13	1.48	Placing the chair next to someone sitting, "do you mind if I have a rest here"? This is an example of moving into an intimate proxemic zone (see later section of this article).
14	2.13	Dancing with the architecture with more of a sense of play and humour.
15	2.34	The audience films David.
16	2.42	Waving goodbye to a train.

- |    |      |  |
|----|------|--|
| 17 | 2.50 | The audience responds by repeating a gesture. This response to an offer may continue with movements being repeated, or may evolve into a conversation. |
| 18 | 3.01 | A commonly understood gesture of initiating a ‘high five’ is responded to by an audience member.   |

Some of these movement scores I would define specifically as issuing an “invitation to audience” (White, 2013); these are numbers 4, 6, 7, 12, 13 and 18. Some of these contain clearly understood gestures of greeting, such as raising a hat or offering a ‘high five’. Other movements create a mutual relationship with the audience with eye contact and an unspoken conversation: “This movement is for you.”

There have also been several instances where the descriptor of ‘dance’ has been rejected by the audience at the station. In the next section, I will discuss some aspects of audience understanding of ‘dance’ within Weekly Ticket. Dismissing David’s performing as not recognisably skilful or recognisable illuminates our audience’s prior understanding of what performance or dance ‘should’ be.

## **Dance defined by our audience**

To our Australian audience, dance may relate to certain styles they are familiar with from their cultural backgrounds (for example, traditional Vietnamese dance), or commonly known global Western forms such as ballet. One morning in August 2017, David was performing with Paea, in a version of Weekly Ticket for the “Due West” festival. In this instance, we specifically encouraged our audience to join in dancing and improvising with David and Paea. Either David or Paea would offer an explicit verbal invitation: “Would you like to dance with us?” One woman watched for a while and then stated categorically: “That’s not dance, this is dance!” She then executed a startling high kick, her leg stretching parallel with her torso. She had obviously trained in ballet. She danced for a while with David and Paea, but the improvisational nature of the dancing was unfamiliar and she soon left. Conversely, another woman joined in and danced for around 15 minutes. She seemed quite un-self-conscious, copying and extending movement patterns, physically improvising and talking, at the same time, to both Paea and David. The give and take of conversation and movement seemed natural and organic to me as a watcher, with a strong sense of mutuality and direct relations.



**Figure 1: David and Paea at the Due West Festival. On the left the ballet dancer moves with Paea, the other dancer improvises opposite David.<sup>vii</sup>**

Another day, a few women joined in, drawing an appreciative crowd of Metro Train employees. On a later occasion, one of the male Metro workers told me that the performance was “much better” when there were women involved. Only women were prepared to dance and improvise in public with David and Paea during three performances in August 2017 for the Due West Festival.



**Figure 2: Male Metro employee watching David dance with three women. (Due West Festival, August 2017)**

On another occasion, David’s ‘skills’ as a dancer or performer were humorously referred to by an audience member, who shouted as they walked past:

*Audience I give it 5 out of 10*

*Me What would bring your score up to 6?*

*Audience If he could stand on his head!*

*Field notes, May 2019*

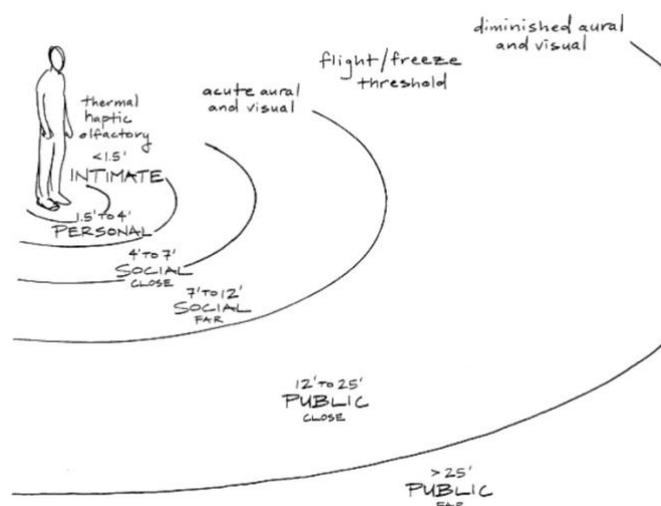
This quick conversation illuminates a judgemental attitude towards David's performing, with this particular audience member expressing a specific score out of 10. In this initial moment of curiosity, they are assessing what he is doing in terms of obvious skills, and choosing to participate by calling out a humorous comment. Revealingly, the audience member states that they would be more impressed if David was performing something more difficult, like standing on his head (or perhaps that is just the first idea they had when I challenged their scoring rubric!). Perhaps, also, the idea of 'scoring' performance comes from reality TV shows such as 'Australia's got Talent', where the purpose of performance is to be scored by judges, in the hope that the performer may progress to further rounds of the competition. Successful contestants in this genre display extraordinary skills in their particular field. Other interactions we have had also contained the idea that greater (more obvious) 'skills' would enhance our performance. I spoke with a station manager in August 2019, asking for his feedback on our project. He said he thought it would be good if David performed with other people, and described these extra people as doing more 'acrobatics' or 'circus'. Performance modes that involve skills such as ballet or circus are more easily recognised, particularly in non-traditional environments. Buskers who perform 'circle shows' rely on the obvious skills of balancing and juggling to engage with their audience.

The improvised dance realm of Weekly Ticket is more difficult to categorise; the skills of the dancer may be less obvious to our audience, with specific movements less obviously physically challenging. The relational skills developed over a lifetime of performance and theatre training may also not be recognised or applauded. However, other audience members have praised David. One person approached David when he was dancing on the forecourt of the station. This person strode straight up to David with his arm outstretched, offering a hand-shake, and enthusiastically told him "you are a very good dancer!" Other audience members have communicated their recognition of David's enjoyment of dancing, saying to David things like "you really love dancing don't you!" One woman confided in me in a particularly intimate manner: "I love watching men dance." Consistently, most audience members appear to categorise what David is doing as dancing.

Alongside my earlier descriptor of this mode of dance as being the expression of “inscribed movement memory” (Louppe, 2010, p. 52), improvised dance involves being physically present in a mode of deep attentiveness. In public spaces, the complexity of social behaviours and appropriateness is weighed up and decisions made at lightning speed as a performer decides how to react to an audience offer, either physically or verbally. Can this audience participate in a humorous, playful sequence? Are they comfortable? Can I make them feel more comfortable? These questions are asked internally by a performer. The visual and atmospheric cues used by improvising dancers to make decisions will be explored, in detail, in relation to human behaviours within proxemic zones and social space, in the next section.

### Proxemic Zones – a definition

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall’s notation of proxemic zones (1963) defines specific distances between people in order to discuss how various activities are considered socially acceptable within these zones. This notation is still in current use by a range of performers and scholars. I will avoid the more controversial ideas of cultural behaviour that Hall outlined in his original research<sup>viii</sup> and use this framework to discuss the disruption of space by performance.



**Figure 3: Proxemic Zones – sketch by Angrette McCloskey. (Hill & Paris, 2014, p. 7)**

My understanding of the importance of distance and proxemics is part of my dramaturgical research framework, an example of a micro element of performance creating a macro landscape. Similarly, my perspective of devising theatre is informed by an interest and awareness of space and placement of people in space. What is it

like to watch a performer at far distance in the landscape? What is it like to observe two people talking with energy and fun together? What is it like to overhear a loud conversation called across a public place? I also have a working understanding of moving within social and public space as a street theatre performer, a lived experience of the complex improvisatory negotiation that takes place in the moment. My interest also comes from a strong sense that space is important to our audience. This sense was described succinctly by an audience member I spoke to in September 2019. This audience member (Gary<sup>ix</sup>) was watching David in a surreptitious way as David was dancing on the overpass. By surreptitious, I mean that he was purposefully standing near David (in close public space) for an extended time, but not engaging in any direct eye-contact with David. When I discussed this with David later, he said he had a strong sense that he should not approach Gary. However, Gary was frequently glancing over at me (watching from a further distance), so I moved closer and started a conversation with him. The following conversation is not verbatim. I reconstructed the important points immediately after the conversation took place:

*G Is he someone you know (referring to David)?*

*Me Yes, I do know him. I'm just interested in what people think about what he's doing (I was asking about what he thought of our artistic project).*

*G (Talked about safety and risk rather than any reference to dancing or art) I don't trust anyone. I've got two stab wounds in my back.*

*M I voice sympathy and ask what happened.*

*G Someone came at me with a screwdriver. I got stitches taken out on Sunday (he described he was attacked in Footscray Mall, just a couple of blocks away from where we are).*

*M I can understand you would be very wary of anyone behaving unusually.*

*G Definitely ... Up to them what they do, entertain themselves, but stand across the border, you know what I mean?*

*M You'd like them to be a few metres away?*

*G Yeah ... sometimes street performers get in your face, then they know that they're annoying you so they do it more to get the crowd. But he (David) kept his distance.*

*Field notes, September 2019*

Gary identifies several important points about space and performance, from an audience perspective. First, that there is a 'border', perhaps the border between

social and public space as identified by Hall, and if a performer crosses that border into social territory it can be confronting as it is too intimate. Gary also analysed the use of intimate or personal space by other ‘street performers’ trying to attract a crowd, perhaps by doing something risky like getting an audience member to hold a fire torch, or by touching them physically, or similar. Gary described this as being ‘annoying’. He was only comfortable being in close public space with David. However, he appeared to be happy standing with me in personal or close social space to have a conversation. I surmise that this was because I was not performing or behaving unusually in any way (I was standing still and watching David from a distance), so appeared non-threatening (and also perhaps because I am female). This example shows how notions of space are important to audience and performer alike. David, as an experienced performer, looks for cues concerning appropriate spaces to inhabit with the audience. If cues of avoided eye contact, or an angry demeanour with glaring or defensive body posture (as Gary had towards David) are apparent, then the performer who is constantly seeking mutuality moves on. However, the playful performer does take risks; even without eye contact, the performer may make a judgement that moving into closer territory will be possible. Theatre artist and scholar Mike Pearson describes behaviour within proxemic zones, and how performance may disrupt these:

*Entry into different zones permits and enables different modes of physical and verbal discourse: different orders of expression may only be apparent within particular zones; different tones or extensions of voice may only be appropriate in each zone ... Transgression may be sanctioned in extreme circumstance or by social convention. And by performance too, always at the interface of the appropriate and the inappropriate. (2001, p. 19)*

Operating within a sense of theatricality, humour, play and mutuality is critical in order for David’s activity to be recognised as performance and not mental illness or other reasons for ‘inappropriate’ behaviour.

I will now discuss two disruptions or transgressions of proxemic behaviour that occur within Weekly Ticket: the furthest zone, where the audience are at a far distance from David, and the closest zone where the audience are within intimate space. I will give specific examples of these ‘disruptive’ behaviours and illustrate them with photographs, quotes from David and a short film.

## The artist performs in Far Public Space

The audience may notice David at a far public distance (further away than 7.6 metres<sup>x</sup>). He might catch their eye because his movement patterns are unusual, or they may notice his chair. His invitation to the audience in this instance is “relax and watch me dance”, but his ‘performance mode’ involves being immersed in dance, rather than responding to audience.



**Figure 4: David at a distance.**

In Figure 4, David is dancing on the furthest reach of the platform, a space where commuters would seldom go, as it is past the area where trains stop (the train in the photo is moving past him). Dancing there, he is viewed at a distance as an architectural anomaly, a different shape, a flash of movement, a person in an unusual place. For the audience idly looking out of the window of the moving train, he would be a surprising, fleeting image, a person appearing where commuters would only expect to see graffitied concrete walls across the train lines. The size of this audience watching from inside a train is impossible to count and difficult to research (as I have not been a part of these audiences). At times, our audience would number into the hundreds for any one performance session. A post on our Weekly Ticket Facebook page documents one person’s experience of being part of a crowd of the audience passing David in a train:

Thank you for creating a ripple of warm gentle laughter through the train carriage I was on this morning. As we made the stop in Footscray, enough

people looked up and out to see you to tip the balance from a group of individuals in their private spaces to a small community sharing an experience. Facebook, April 2016



**Figure 5: Audience watch from a train.**

These commuters may have noticed David in the distance and found humour in the unexpected sight of him dancing with a chair. One audience member looking out of the window of the train and laughing may have attracted the attention of other people. The audience is 'safe' to watch at a far distance, or from within a train. They may watch with a sense of "I am completely giving this my undivided attention". Within the safety of a large distance, the audience has agency to watch as long as they want to, without the anxiety of having to participate directly. If David moves towards them, they might withdraw their attention in order to not participate, or they might keep eye contact and be available for conversation or improvised interaction. The next section discusses the opposite sense of space, where David moves into personal and intimate space with the audience.

## Personal and intimate space

David sometimes disrupts typical behaviour in close personal space at the station. Strangers do share intimate personal space when they are commuting, squeezing into trains, or waiting very close to other people in order to quickly enter a train when the doors open, but these close encounters usually happen without clear eye contact or one person initiating a conversation, such as “where are you off to today?” as David might. As intimate theatre performer and scholar Leslie Hill describes, being close to strangers in these types of environments (non-performance situations where people are in crowds) is considered ‘close’ or ‘crowded’ rather than intimate, with people taking the intimacy out of the closeness by avoiding eye contact, staying as immobile as possible and “withdrawing upon accidental contact (if possible)” (Hill & Paris, 2014, p. 12). Performance transforms this closeness into intimacy, with a strong sense of participation when the audience can touch, and clearly see and hear David in intimate proximity. Also, audience may notice David in intimate proximity with another audience, shaking their hand or touching them in a familiar way on the shoulder, conferring a friendly relationship<sup>xi</sup>. Being in intimate space has a particular energy. The senses are heightened as we see the detail of another’s face or touch and even smell another person. In performance, this intimacy has an extra heightened charge as performer and audience enter an intimate game together in public. This charge is also felt by the audience watching from a distance, as I have outlined in this section.

The following photographs show David in intimate proximity with the audience. The first two capture a moment of conversation within intimate space. Intimate space is the perfect distance for quiet conversation, a mutual and playful ‘to and fro’ not overheard but visible to others.



**Figure 6:** Intimate encounter with audience member on his way to the football. Sharing a joke.



**Figure 7:** Intimate encounter with audience in an elevator. A more serious and personal conversation.



**Figure 8: Intimate encounter on the overpass. Sitting on audience member’s lap**

In Figure 8 David is sitting on someone’s lap—an extremely intimate physical relationship that would normally only take place with clear negotiation and mutual acceptance. Leslie Hill describes a similar moment, when she was an audience member inside a theatre, and a performer moved from the stage and sat on her lap. She characterises this negotiation as an unspoken “eye contact conversation” that resulted in Hill’s consent, and describes this unspoken conversation: “[Performer:] ‘I know this is strange but if it isn’t going to panic you I’m going to sit in your lap now’... Me, ... ‘okay’” (Hill & Paris, 2014, p. 13). More commonly in *Weekly Ticket*, this type of ‘cheeky’ behaviour (sitting on a lap) would be initiated by the audience member rather than David (to ensure it is appropriate and comfortable for both), though still requiring communication via gesture and eye contact. In the instance of David sitting on a woman’s lap, as the photo captures, this jumping into intimate space is a source of humour for them both and for the watching audience, who are friends of the person on the chair. The crossing of typical intimacy boundaries in this instance is a source of humour as both performer and audience member are being cheeky and doing something a bit ‘naughty’ and daring. A passing audience or audience in the distance may have their attention drawn to this energetic and joyful interaction and the sound of laughter.

The following film also demonstrates how moving into intimate space with audience attracts the attention of others:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeFNOnyCrDM> (1 minute 20 secs) (no sound).<sup>xii</sup>

Three audience members captured on film clearly participate in Weekly Ticket within different proxemic zones. David enters into close social space with Audience #1, who was standing on the platform prior to David arriving. Audience #2 enters the environment where David is dancing and moves confidently to stand at far social space. Audience #2's body posture faces David, and he has constant eye contact, watching David with curiosity from a distance he has chosen.

Of particular interest is Audience #1; they were in position before David entered, and they do not move away to a further distance but only glance at David from time to time checking on what he is doing. However, when Audience #3 enters and immediately moves into intimate space with David, the attention of Audience #1 is fully captured for a moment and they watch, with interest, the interaction between David and Audience #3.



**Figure 9: Still image from film. Intimate connection attracts the attention of other audience.**

This moment captures what David and I believe to be true—that confidently moving into intimate proximity with audience creates energy and interest for other audience. Seeing one audience member strongly accepting an ‘invitation to audience’ in close personal space brings others into the audience as well. A relational artwork “creates, within its method of production and then at the moment of its exhibition, a momentary grouping of participating viewers” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 58). In these moments, our audience notice other people noticing something, and stop to look themselves. I have often watched a small group of energetic audience

responding to David; this attention is picked up by others nearby and, perhaps, some then start to take photos and film. It is clear that this group of people have become an audience when (as happens sometimes) they all applaud when David finishes a movement pattern, or changes what he is doing. Thus, the rituals of Western performance are embraced and the audience claps at the end of a performance. This audience are generally quite close to each other, they can pick up on physical cues with peripheral vision and sound (such as applauding), and they might glance at each other to share their enjoyment.

## Conclusion

In this article I have described various disruptions of behaviour within proxemic zones by David and audience at Footscray Station. This study contributes further to an understanding of performance, audience and participation, in a public context such as this. It points to a complex human ecology that this performance exists within, and includes negotiations of, space and distance, subtle gestures, unspoken eye contact conversations, mutual rhythms and intimate moments (all being elements negotiated by both performer and audience). Noticing micro moments of ‘curiosity’ when the audience decides to participate are key factors of interest to me, as a dramaturg; the wavering sense of the audience choosing to embrace and become part of something they might not fully understand is a complex, unspoken conversation, and an ongoing conversation that reveals to us what performance and art can become, over time.

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<sup>i</sup> WTF is our deliberate acronym, I shorten the full name to Weekly Ticket in this article.

<sup>ii</sup> "An ambitious and expansive project by Paul Keating's Labor Government, it was the first Commonwealth cultural policy document in Australia's history. Its initial impact was significant, with Keating committing A\$252 million of additional spending over four years to the arts and cultural industries in Australia" (Hawkings, 2014, para 1).

<sup>iii</sup> Australia's Federal arts funding body.

<sup>iv</sup> I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the lands on which we work. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

<sup>v</sup> A description of Footscray from an urban culture online magazine "Acclaim" sums it up: "If you live in Melbourne you'll have heard of the western suburb Footscray, or 'Footscrazy', or 'Footscary' to those who affectionately call this once industrial, blossoming multi-cultural hub home. Known for its amazing discount store Savers, its influx of young, broke creatives fleeing Brunswick and apparently one of the best hot chocolates in Melbourne. It's also known for the melodic sound of constant police sirens, drug related violence and neglected landscapes" (Nantes, n.d.).

<sup>vi</sup> David lives in Seddon, one train stop further away from the city to Footscray. Full disclosure: David is my husband and we have lived in the same house in Seddon together since 1999.

<sup>vii</sup> All images have been taken by the author.

<sup>viii</sup> Mike Pearson in his book *Theatre/Archaeology* describes Hall's research as a "contentious study of western intercourse" (2001, p. 19). Performer and scholar Leslie Hill states, the original research contains "1960s race and gender 'time bombs'" (Hill & Paris 2014, p. 7).

<sup>ix</sup> All names have been changed.

<sup>x</sup> I translate all of Hall's measurements into metric measurements.

<sup>xi</sup> Many of these performance modes are currently suspended due to compulsory social distancing and mask wearing in Melbourne due to COVID-19.

<sup>xii</sup> Filmed by Leo Palmer, who made a short documentary about Weekly Ticket. I have permission to use this short section of footage.