Performative Somaesthetics

Interconnections of Dancers, Audiences, and Sites

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Abstract: *This essay contributes to the performative branch of somaesthetics through an exploration of the triangulated relationships among performers, audiences, and sites. Dancer agency, the multisensory nature of audience experiences, and embodied encounters with non-traditional dance sites provide lenses for analyzing the dynamic relationships between these elements as live performance unfolds. Through theoretical frameworks and two dance case studies—TooMortal (2012) by Shobana Jeyasingh and Dusk at Stonehenge (2009) by Nina Rajarani—the authors draw upon somaesthetics to examine the holistic comingling of embodied aesthetic appreciation and physical environments.*

Keywords: *somaesthetics, dance, site, Bharatanatyam, audience experience, rasa.*

Introduction

Situated at the intersection of philosophy, embodied practices, and the cultivation of the body to advance self-awareness, somaesthetics is a field ripe for the analysis of dance. Both combine theory and practice, cross disciplinary boundaries, and offer insights into entwined relationships between the self and the body—how embodied experiences inform (and comprise) the self and how the body can function as an active agent in philosophical practice (LaMothe, 2015; Spatz, 2015).

Richard Shusterman developed somaesthetics as a field "concerned with the sentient perceiving 'body-mind'…rather than with the body as a mere physical object or mechanism" (2007, p. 139), an orientation with direct applications to the nuanced work of dancers in practice and performance. Casting a wide net, Shusterman related somaesthetics to philosophy as an "art of living" (2018a, p. 2), outlining dual aspirations of "critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body," while situating "the body as the site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (p. 1). This scope bridges dancers and spectators, incorporating theoretical considerations of the body as both a conveyor and perceiver of aesthetics.

Shusterman's holistic approach offers a lens for viewing multiple somaesthetic elements simultaneously at play. On the side of aesthetic creativity, the dancer is a subject who expresses through honed corporeal intelligence while navigating physical, social, and situational factors. Appreciating a spectrum of vantage points, somaesthetics recognizes spectatorship as embodied,

responsive, and distinctive. Acknowledging external influences on the body, somaesthetics enables a grounded analysis, recognizing the significance of site for examinations of the somaesthetics of performance.

In this essay, we map the relationships between these three elements to propose a framework for analyzing live performance as a durational experience hinging on the triangulation of dancers, audiences, and sites. With this strategy, we seek to provide a lens for deploying somaesthetic theories within studies of performance in a manner that recognizes both the individual nature of somaesthetic awareness and the overarching contexts and dynamics that inform such experiences.[1]

To do so, we have chosen to feature choreographies staged outside of theatrical settings to tease out the array of somaesthetic qualities encountered in built space, as well as the dramatic differences that distinct sites offer. Throughout this paper, we use the term "site-based"[2] to highlight the centrality of site for our analysis, while also acknowledging the spectrum of methods of working and staging reflected in our examples. Our choice of site-based works is informed by our own backgrounds as researchers keen on investigating embodied experiences of shared spaces and navigating the borderline between theory and praxis (Banerjee, 2014, 2018; Fiala, 2014, 2016), specifically as practitioners of the classical dance form Bharatanatyam,[3] which has roots in ancient India and contemporary manifestations across the globe.

We examine two site-based choreographies as examples of the divergent somaesthetic qualities of site, choreography, and audience positioning—*TooMortal* (2012) by Shobana Jeyasingh, performed amongst the pews of historic churches, and *Dusk at Stonehenge* (2009) by Nina Rajarani, presented in the open expanse in front of Stonehenge. Our perspective takes a broad overview, sketching a theoretical blueprint for seeing intersecting and mutually influential components at play in site-based dance, with the two selected choreographies serving as examples for illustration and comparison. Prior to delving into these works, we briefly lay the groundwork for analysis—performative somaesthetics, dance as a form of knowledge, embodied audience experiences, and the influential factor of site—to form a foundation for analyzing site-based performance.

Performative Somaesthetics

In crafting a structure for somaesthetics as a discipline, Shusterman outlined three core dimensions, ranging from contextual to comparative and practical approaches. *Analytic somaesthetics* covers scientific as well as ontological, epistemological, and sociopolitical analyses, exploring the "basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices" as well as how such factors

1 The present essay lays the theoretical groundwork for practical applications of somaesthetics, which we pursue in our companion article focused on exploring the sensory nature of audience experiences, as well as approaches for engaging dance audiences (Banerjee & Fiala, 2019). For additional analyses of relationships between site, audience, and performers, see Fischer-Lichte (2008b), Hunter (2012), and Stock (2011).

2 Our usage of "site-based" acknowledges the range of forms and processes that work with site can involve, from "site-specific" to "site-determined," "site-referenced," "site-conscious," "site-responsive," or "context-specific" (Pearson, 2010, p. 8). Alongside myriad forms of site-based work exist an array of degrees of community involvement in creation and performance, as well as a variety of methods of positioning and engaging audiences. For studies of site-based performance, see Wilkie (2002), Hunter (2005, 2015), and Pearson (2010). Co-author Suparna Banerjee (2014) has further examined site-based diasporic South Asian dance in the UK in her doctoral dissertation (see Chapter 5, pp. 184-235).

3 As a form that includes storytelling components as well as abstract dance that balances rhythm, precision, and grace, Bharatanatyam's combination of the physical, emotional, psychological, cultural, and spiritual offers an example of the abundant channels for somaesthetic analysis within the field of dance. Over the past century, Bharatanatyam has traced a path from temples to theatres, from India to diasporas, and from theatres to non-arts sites. Numerous studies have explored political, social, historical, artistic, and power ramifications of these movements. For examinations of Bharatanatyam's history over the past 150 years, see Gaston (1996), Meduri (2004), O'Shea (2007), and Soneji (2011).

"function in our knowledge and construction of reality" (1999, p. 304). *Practical somaesthetics* entails the physical practice of "disciplined body work aimed at somatic self-improvement" (p. 307). *Pragmatic somaesthetics* turns a methodical, expository eye toward such physical techniques, both individually and comparatively (p. 304).

Under the umbrella of comparative inquiry, Shusterman divided somatic practices into representational practices, concerning the body's physical appearance, and experiential disciplines, dedicated to "inner" experience aimed at improving both the quality and the acuteness of somatic awareness (p. 305). These categories serve a functional purpose, helping to isolate and identify phenomena for analysis, however, Shusterman underscored the interconnectedness of these dimensions as well, noting in particular the overlap between external and internal factors, as well as self-focused and other-focused practices, all of which influence somaesthetics on an individual level (p. 306).

While discussing representational and experiential modes of practice, Shusterman noted the possibility for a third arena, performative somaesthetics, considering this frame for disciplines such as martial arts, gymnastics, and athletics. Ultimately, Shusterman observed that such activities could fall within representational or experiential arenas, to the degree that they "aim either at the external exhibition of one's strength and health or alternatively at one's inner feelings of those powers" (1999, p. 306). These two prongs of external exhibition and internal feeling offer productive avenues for comparative somaesthetic analyses of dance, along with possibilities for dance studies across practical, pragmatic, and analytic dimensions. That said, our aim is to contribute to scholarship building out the particular arena of performative somaesthetics in terms of its applications for the performing arts generally and dance specifically.

In this essay, performative somaesthetics provides a framework for exploring a sphere of activity that exists in-between the representational and experiential—creative and intentional embodied aesthetic activity manifested in the distinctive relationships between dancers, sites, and audiences as live performance unfolds. Site-based dance is here viewed as durational, relational, and contextual. Performative somaesthetics provides a basis for analyzing site-based dance as a dynamic intersection that bleeds across representation and experience, entailing the crafting and evolution of relationships with space, audience, and one's own body.

Somaesthetics and Dance—Agency, Artistry, and Site

Shusterman's centering of the "body-mind" (2007, p. 139) provides myriad paths for exploring dance in its variety—showcased to audiences and refined alone in studios; entrenched in systems of power and symbolic of acts of resistance; a connection to history, culture, or community; a moving meditation; a means of dynamically relating to time and space; and a method of fundamentally altering the body that changes how one traverses and experiences the world. Despite the clear connection between somaesthetics and the aesthetic body-based labor of dance, the intersection of somaesthetics and dance is still gradually gaining scholarly attention.[4]

Applications have included dance education and performance (Arnold, 2005; Carter, 2015), kinesthetic awareness and strategies for refinement (Mullis, 2006, 2008), particular choreographers and practices (Ginot, 2010; Horváth, 2018), and the critique of tendencies to downplay dancer personhood in the valuation of choreographic works (Shusterman, 2019).

4 Over recent decades, somaesthetics has been incorporated into research surrounding numerous artistic disciplines, including poetry (Bartczak, 2012), literature and performance (Woźniak, Lisowska, & Budziak, 2017), visual art (Feng, 2015; Ryynänen, 2015), photography (Shusterman, 2012; Antal 2018), music (Maus, 2010; Tarvainen, 2018; Marino 2019), and architecture (Shusterman, 2011, 2012; Veres, 2018).

Peter J. Arnold posited dance as a form of somaesthetic education that provides students tools for "understanding and appraising; creating and composing; and performing and expressing" (p. 53). Taking a broad view, Curtis L. Carter proposed multiple avenues for dance somaesthetics, from dance as it is constructed by choreographers and enacted by dancers, to the embodied reception of dance in spectators, to broader possibilities provided by comparative analyses of somaesthetic qualities among different dance forms. Promoting a balanced approach to somatic practices as "*objects* of research," Isabelle Ginot foregrounded the importance of situating such work within histories, preferences, and power, noting that "sensations themselves are in no way exempt from ideology, exclusions, or disenfranchisement" (p. 25). Tying dance into larger aesthetic histories that privilege art objects over practice, Shusterman stressed the need to shift value structures toward acknowledging dancers as subjects who bring "a compound consciousness" to their work, one that includes the performance of emotion, narrative, or states of being as well as the dancer's "own somaesthetic feelings" (p. 157).

Existing work aids dance practitioners and scholars in potentially drawing upon performative somaesthetics to develop strategies for cultivating audiences' awareness and appreciation, to incorporate somatic responses into performance analysis, or to elevate dancer performance. In addition to such practical applications, performative somaesthetics enables the analysis of a coalescence of influential factors, including the immediate elements of audiences, dancers, and site; overarching layers such as histories, cultures, and power dynamics; and more personal, individually determined factors.

Singling out the dancer aspect of dancer-audience-site relationships provides a lens for viewing dance as a form of embodied knowledge reflected in artistic choices that respond to a variety of situational variables. Focusing on the durational nature of dance, Sondra Horton Fraleigh referred to dance as "a *becoming*" where "even the still points flow through time" (1987, p. 192). Dance in this vein can be seen as a process, an agential act that is constantly developed within and in response to a given situation. While dancers regularly navigate elements of choice and chance in performance and practice across studio spaces and traditional theatres, non-traditional sites provide a platform for foregrounding dancer adaptability and artistic responsiveness. Additionally, describing dance as "a *becoming*" promotes a process approach to qualitative interpretations (internal to performers and appreciated by audiences) whereby qualities such as beauty, groove, power, or the grotesque are not just identified or felt in a moment, but are experientially performed and apprehended through time.

In moving from habitual theatre or studio spaces to alternative settings, dancers step into environments that require not only new applications of technique, but also reconsiderations and modifications, at times spontaneously, to adjust to unexpected challenges. This dancer versatility can be viewed as a convergence of dance technique, performer choices, and site that can be further understood via Shobana Jeyasingh's comments on classical dance:

> *We do not want to be bound by history, but we do not want to deny it. It is desirable that one first understand classicism [i.e. classical dance, ballet, or Bharatanatyam] and then understand how to depart from it. To break rules you have to know the rules in a very deep way* (qtd. in Katrak, 2014, p. 75)

While site-based dance may "break rules" of standard dance practice, it also leans upon embodied knowledge and artistry, merging mental, physical, emotional, relational, and artistic registers. Dance in non-traditional settings is therefore more than physical adjustments to spatial

restraints; it is an artistic reworking of technique and choreography imbued with dynamic relationships to audience and site, actively wielded and transformed by dancers in real time.[5]

Sensorial Audience Experiences

Beyond somaesthetic analyses specific to dancers, there are precedents for considering the sensory-rich nature of audience experiences of performing arts. In the terrain of Indian classical arts, audience encounters have been described in the *Natyashastra*,[6] an ancient compendium on the performing arts, in terms of *rasa*.[7] Here *rasa* is explained as the cumulative, embodied, emotional outcome resulting from determining stimuli, consequential reactions, and "complementary psychological states."[8] A wealth of scholarship has explored the *Natyashastra* and *rasa*,[9] while the concept of *saundarya*—aesthetics or beauty—and the related *saundarya shastra*, or "theory of beauty," can be traced back to this seminal work (Ghosh, 1951). In addition to providing a foundation for identifying and experiencing cadences, gradations, and differences, *rasa* also lends researchers metaphors of embodied experience relevant to somaesthetics. Likened to the nuanced and layered appreciation of flavor in cuisine, the concept of *rasa* offers a framework that entwines the physical, transcendental, emotional, and personal to produce an essence that lingers with an audience.

Drawing out this metaphor, Saskia Kersenboom noted that the "tasting" of an exquisite art experience is a matter of "not only proper ingredients, but also their combination and exact timing…a chain of causes and effects that gradually build up a dominant sensory awareness" (Kersenboom, 2007, p. 211).[10] Audience experiences are here connected to sensory encounters and firmly temporal in character. This speaks to the durational nature of live performance where, even if contributing to an overarching feeling, momentary and cumulative "tastes" play out through contrasts, evolutions, repetitions, reinterpretations, shifts, pauses, and surprises that transpire through time and within a particular context.

While shifting performative journeys serve as robust fodder for analyzing audience responses, these sensations are not fully siloed from the contexts in which they occur. Audiences' experiences are enmeshed in physical environments, sociopolitical conditions, histories, and

5 In this paper, we speak broadly of dancer agency in the context of specific site-based choreographies, however, further scrutiny could explore distinctive somaesthetic aspects of choreographic practices, dancers' embodiment of choreography, elements of improvisation, and intersections of these components in site-based dance performances.

6 Attributed to Bharata Muni, the *Natyashastra* is a compendium on the performing arts written in Sanskrit dating to between roughly 200 BCE to 200 CE, although estimates vary. Comprising a total of 36 chapters, this treatise includes analyses of the nature of performance, the structure of a play, stage construction, genres of acting, body movements, the art of makeup and costuming, musical instruments, and the integration of music within dance/theatre performances. For Sanskrit words, we here use common translated formations and italics rather than diacritical markings.

7 In Sanskrit, *rasa* has connotations ranging from juice to taste, flavor, or essence, with implications varying from intoxication to the metaphysical absolute, and from concepts such as "beauty" to perceptions of "good taste" in the performing arts. For details on the evolution of meanings of *rasa*, see Thampi (1965).

8 "*vibhāva anubhāva vyabhicāri saṃyogād rasaniṣpattiḥ*" ["Now the Sentiment is produced (*rasa-niṣpattiḥ*) from a combination (*saṃyoga*) of Determinants (*vibhāva*), Consequents (*anubhāva*) and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicāri- bhāva*)"] (Ghosh, 1951, 6:31, p. 105). These references have been similarly translated to describe *rasa* as the "result of *vibhava* (stimulus), *anubhava* (involuntary reaction), and *vyabhicari bhava* (voluntary reaction)" (Bharata Muni, qtd. in Schechner, 2001, p. 29). This cause and effect sequence can be understood as the emotional response of an audience, moved by a performer's cultivation of a mood, with dominant moods outlined in the *Natyashastra* including love, courage, fear/shame, disgust, humor, sorrow/compassion, surprise/wonder, and rage. For additional analyses of *rasa*, see Chaudhury (1952), and Sundararajan & Raina (2016).

9 See, for example, Cuneo (2015), Dace (1963), Hogan (1996), Larson (1976), and Raghavan (1988).

10 Kersenboom connected this viewpoint to other approaches to aesthetics, commenting that "Experts in this canon are rasikas, that is 'tasters' of art, a perspective that does not deviate from the etymology of the Greek *aisthanomai*, that is, 'to taste,' for aesthetics" (2007, p. 211). Highlighting distinctions between Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*, Richard Schechner emphasized that, "Rasa fills space, joining the outside to the inside. Food is actively taken into the body, becomes part of the body, works from the inside…An aesthetic founded on rasa is fundamentally different than one founded on the 'theatron,' the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic" (2001, p. 29).

personal intersections of culture, biography, and place. Viewing audiences within such a web of relationships and situations both highlights the sundry nature of somaesthetic stimuli at play in live performance and reveals "audience" as a role both offered and taken up through various means. As Kalpana Ram explained, *rasika* (an aesthete of performing arts in Sanskrit) is not merely descriptive, it offers audiences a category to step into; it is an "invitation to take up a distinctive way of being…to inhabit the time of the present in a very particular way" (2011, p. 161).

Outside of the specific category of *rasika*, and across genres and performance contexts, audiences are invited to inhabit roles ranging from passive to active, and to experience in an assortment of manners conveyed overtly and subtly, positioning both audiences and performers in a variety of relationships with one another. Erika Fischer-Lichte has emphasized one such distinction between theatre viewed as an art object versus theatre approached as an event (2008a, p. 36). The difference outlined is in part embodied, wherein performance as an event is "not merely interpreted by the audience but first and foremost experienced" (p. 17).

While acknowledging the interpellative power of the myriad ways in which audiences are invited to experience performances, Ram also noted the agency of audiences who, while not neutrally invited, maintain the potential to respond in unanticipated ways (2011, p. 168). Connecting such agency to somatic experience, Ketu Katrak elaborated that that "Rasa is felt—bodily, mentally, and emotionally" (2014, p. 19), bridging prevalent mind-body divisions and facilitating an understanding of the spectator's experience via bodily forms of knowing that interweave conceptual, sensory, and critical analyses (pp. 17-21).

Placing *rasa* theory in dialogue with a consideration of audience somaesthetics could provide rich layers for examining the interconnected nature of sensory stimuli and emotional responses. Yet, Shusterman has also outlined a distinction, contrasting somaesthetics with transcendent strains within the broad realm of *rasa* theory, a comparison that he related to the emplacement of art experiences.[11] On the one hand, Shusterman emphasized that "the bracketing off of art from the ordinary space of life is what affords art its feeling of lived intensity and heightened reality" (2001, p. 370). This observation particularly resonates with performing arts staged in established theatrical venues or arts institutions where attendance may entail a form of pilgrimage to a space reserved and designed for focused arts encounters. However, Shusterman balanced this perspective with an understanding of art as "a real part of life," where "our experiences of art are an important part of our real-life experiences" (2003, p. 297), proposing that, "art's apparent diversion from real life may be a needed path of indirection that directs us back to experience life more fully through the infectious intensity of aesthetic experience and the release of affective inhibitions" (2001, p. 370). Artworks such as site-based dance, public art projects, environmental/ecological art, and community-engaged art potentially bear a relationship to the transformative return described by Shusterman. Here, known places, identities, and habits can be both recognized and confronted anew via the prism of art, provoking a reorientation, however momentary, within quotidian space.

The triangulation of dancers-audiences-site is therefore more than a shift in location, potentially entailing as well a shift in relationships and in the dynamics of relating to self, others, and the choreography being performed. In this regard, we view audience encounters as simultaneously individual, relational, and contextual—embodied amalgams of personal histories and factors, performance stimuli (auditory, visual, haptic, etc.), conceptual content,

11 For an exploration of Shusterman's approach to art as dramatization in relation to *rasa* theory, see Shusterman (2001), Ghosh (2003), and Shusterman (2003).

and the site in which experiences unfold.

Somaesthetics and Site

Whether a performance is held in a theatre, restaged outside an art venue, or crafted uniquely for and in relationship with a particular place, site supports the creative development of immersive or focused encounters, and serves as an influential vessel or landscape for experience. While addressing a number of facets of dances staged in sites that are not typical art spaces, this paper focuses on just two examples of a spectrum of choreographic methods for working with site. Such projects can range from work reliant upon theatrical settings and technical capabilities, to work staged or restaged outside of such spaces, to "site-specific" projects[12] that are deeply connected to, created for, and distinctly existent within a specific site.

Somaesthetics has been used to unpack embodied relationships with site in the contexts of architecture (Shusterman, 2011, 2012; Veres, 2018), atmosphere (Shusterman, 2012), and urban environments (Shusterman, 2000). In *Thinking Through the Body*, Shusterman drew readers' attention to the visceral aspects of engaging with architecture, writing that the soma

> *enables us to appreciate not only the visual effects and structural design features that rely on perceiving distance and depth, but also the multisensorial feelings of moving through space (with their kinesthetic, tactile, proprioceptive qualities) that are crucial to the experience of living with, in, and through architecture.* (2012, p. 224)

Resonances of sounds, shades of light and shadow, linearity or circuity, feelings of warmth or cold, inviting nooks or formal spaces all engage the body in navigating and taking on distinct modes of being and behaving within designed space. Applying this approach to performance spaces, the choice of a site, the site's transformation through staging, and the logistics of welcoming an audience all set a tone before a performance begins. The body is integral to absorbing and responding to site-based stimuli, but the body is itself also situated, embedded in the site it is experiencing. As Shusterman succinctly stated, "Just as we always experience a building in terms of its background environmental framing, so we cannot feel the body alone independent of its wider *Umwelt*"[13] (2012, p. 226). This insight reveals the sensory-rich and connotation-laden environments through which audiences pass and within which they experience performance.

In addition to an immersive environment, site provides a distinctive frame—a context replete with histories, as well as formal and informal associations (which themselves inform physical responses, such as feeling at ease, intimidated, etc.)[14] As Shusterman noted in *Performing Live*, "Experience is inevitably contextual, since it involves the interaction of an experiencing subject and the environing field, both of which are in flux and are affected by their interaction" (2018b [2000], p. 96). This observation fosters an interpretation of site as a key factor that informs

12 Underscoring the difference between site-specific works and existing works restaged in nontraditional locations, Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks argued that site-specific performances are "inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible" (2001, p. 23).

13 Georges Canguilhem described *Umwelt* in relation to perceived relevance, as "a voluntary sample drawn from the *Umgebung*, the geographical environment. But the environment is precisely nothing other than man's *Umwelt*, that is, the usual world of his practical perspective and experience. Like this *Umgebung*, this geographical environment that is external to the animal is, in a sense, centered, ordered, and oriented by a human subject (that is to say a creator of techniques and values)" (2000, p. 20).

14 In "Art as Dramatization," Shusterman explored art as an act of "the staging or framing of scenes" (2001, p. 367) and explained that "A frame not only concentrates but also demarcates; it is thus simultaneously not just a focus but a barrier that separates what is framed from the rest of life" (p. 370). The term "barrier" is particularly relevant to the relationship between site and audience, as it can be interpreted both as a division between spaces and a means of drawing attention to hindrances to arts access, which can range from location inconvenience to forms of invitation/welcome, physical access, degrees of community engagement or lack thereof, and financial costs of participation.

somaesthetic experiences, rather than functioning as a mere static background.

While studying site-based performance, Victoria Hunter elaborated on such an active relationship between audiences and site, describing a performance site as "metaphorically freed from its everyday." In this context, she argued that a site "holds the potential to both locate and *re-locate* the individual, drawing their attention to the site whilst simultaneously challenging pre-conceived notions of the site as the real world is shifted momentarily 'out of focus'" (2012, p. 259).

It is this perceptive and experiential shift that in part separates performative somaesthetics from activities focused primarily on improving bodily appearance or sensory awareness. While the soma is central to dance performance, audience responses, and encounters with a site, in live performance these triangulated elements go beyond their individual components, crafting a scenario that opens up the potential for interrelated somaesthetic explorations. The dance case studies below enable us to examine these intertwined elements while also offering distinct examples of somaesthetic environments—delineated as sensorium and naturescape.

TooMortal

Shobana Jeyasingh's[15] 20-minuted piece *TooMortal* was created for the unique setting of rows of church pews, and has been restaged in multiple locations since its premiere in 2012 at the Venice Biennale (including London, Stockholm, Belgrade, and Worcester). We have chosen one iteration to serve as an example of the work, the 2013 staging of *TooMortal* in St. Pancras Church,[16] a Grade I heritage building that dates back to 1819, located in Euston, London.[17] This columned Greek revivalist style church was built with bricks faced with Portland stone, topped by a stone portico and tower, and accented by red iron entrance doors bordered by decorative terracotta moldings. An external transept, supported by four female draped figures, resembles the caryatids at Erectheion, Athens (Fig. 1). Along the interior, interspersed with pews and pillars, two stories of small windows lead to an apse partially ringed by six columns raised on a marble-faced plinth backlit by stained glass (Fig. 2).

Each staging of *TooMortal*[18] has been exclusively set within the congregation's wooden box pews. Hard, angular, and orderly, the pews in *TooMortal* provided striking contrast to dancers' bodies and movement qualities while also serving as a distinctive dance setting. Critic Sanjoy Roy described the physical makeup of this performance space: "regular rows, blocked in by aisles, contained on the outside but with detailed internal features—shelves, slopes, angles" (2012). In addition to structures of support for dancers to lean on or push against, the pews offered unique choreographic possibilities. As Roy stressed, "The pews…afforded her a kind of visual 'editing' that would have been impossible on stage." This enabled Jeyasingh, in her words, "to place the body at various levels, to see it from unusual perspectives, and to erase it quickly by

15 Choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh has drawn inspiration from unconventional spaces for more than 25 years. *Duets with Automobiles* (1993), a dance for the camera, was set in a corporate office building in London. *Counterpoint* (2010) staged female bodies around a water fountain in London's Somerset House. Her recent piece *Contagion* (2018) was set in venues connected to World War I and commemorated the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic. For more information, see shobanajeyasingh.co.uk.

16 For more on this location, see: "Church of St Pancras." Available at: https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1379062 Accessed July 9, 2019.

17 This iteration of *TooMortal* was organized by Dance Umbrella on October 15, 2013. Suparna Banerjee attended this performance of the work and experiential comments draw upon her notes. For an exploration of *TooMortal* that combines somaesthetics with sensory ethnography, see also our companion article, "Somaesthetics and Embodied Dance Appreciation: A Multisensory Approach" (Banerjee & Fiala, 2019).

18 Images, video clips, interviews, and additional project information are available at: https://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk/works/toomortal.

just dropping the dancers down" (*Church Times*, 2012, Figs. 3 and 4).

Figure 1 Exterior caryatids; **Figure 2** Interior congregational space
St. Pancras Church, London. (Photos by Mike Quinn)

Figure 3 Contrast and intimacy between body and built space, *TooMortal* (2012) by Shobana Jeyasingh, St. Mary's Old Church, London (Photo by Carole Edrich)

Inspired by the arrangement of pews, Jeyasingh imagined "a wooden, wave-rocked sea, from which humans emerge and are tossed about" (qtd. in Roy, 2012). Accordingly, the dancers' soaring and sinking between pews resembled a sea voyage, with tumultuous waves alternated with stillness. Technically pivoting on western contemporary dance idioms, and with dancers only partially visible, *TooMortal* highlighted torso bends, neck rotations, tossed hair, shaking, and suspended legs. This fluid movement vocabulary, executed by a cast of six female dancers, unevenly divided in pews on either side of the aisle, dramatically contrasted with the

site's geometric pews and pillars (Fig. 3). Commenting on this juxtaposition, Jeyasingh, who conceived of *TooMortal* as an intimate conversation of the body with built space, described the piece as "an essay on bodies in this very man-made structure." Underscoring that "The human body is…ephemeral, prone to damage," Jeyasingh emphasized the distinction and intimacy "between human body and permanent building" (*Church Times*, 2012).

Figure 4 Shifting levels, *TooMortal* (2012) by Shobana Jeyasingh, St. Swithun's Church, Worcester. (Photo by Richard Dean, Courtesy of Shobana Jeyasingh Dance)

Clad in crimson red, the female bodies could be viewed as invoking a blaze of passion within the pious church setting, which echoed with sound artist Cassiel's remixed score of chimes based on James MacMillan's *Tenebrae Responsories*. While Jeyasingh highlighted formal aspects of her choice to cast women (*Church Times*, 2012), multiple commentaries have called attention to the symbolic nature of positioning women's bodies within a church setting, alternately flung in exaggerated struggles and still, with a gaze fixed on the audience (Roy, 2012; Nijhawan, 2017). Amita Nijhawan wove together the significance of female bodies, choreography, and church site, writing that,

> *There is something acutely disturbing about seeing women's heads balanced on a row of coffins [Fig. 5], lined up, one next to the other, hair flowing and clad in red. This calls to mind, all at once, witch trials, sexual and war crimes against women, and ritual sacrifices of women—not as individuals, but as a group* (2017, p. 24)

While *TooMortal* can be interpreted as a critique of historic injustices, the piece also offered audiences the possibility to create their own myths, transforming the fixed boundaries of religiosity, gender, and history. In one sequence, dancers performed incessant, horizontal sliding movements, re-scripting the setting as a palimpsest to be reimagined by dancers, choreographer, and audiences.

Figure 5 Dancers balanced in a row, *TooMortal* (2012) by Shobana Jeyasingh, St. Mary's Old Church, London. (Photo by Carole Edrich)

Taking a step back from the dancers' embodiment of choreography, the church site can be interpreted as a sensorium for audiences, a contained built environment that serves as an immersive and focused vessel for site-based performance. Within the geometric container of the church, fashioned in stone, wood, and glass, audience members were led by a group of Dance Umbrella volunteers to stand and observe the piece in respectful silence, their comportment mirroring the formal, reserved atmosphere of the church. Quietly standing in this controlled domain, audiences, enveloped by the sound of echoing bells, took in the scene of artificial light beams scattered by odoriferous haze, watching the choreography from within a contained multisensory world.

Viewing *TooMortal* via the lens of somaesthetics, the body can be understood as a theme of the piece (women's bodies), a mode of performance (deep engagement with the site and choreography reliant on a particular setting), and a visceral means of implicating audiences. Drawing upon the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sarah B. Fowler underscored that "no sense is independent of any other, nor is the organization of our sensory experience independent of our moving through whatever world we inhabit" (1985, p. 62). In this vein, relating to the space as a sensorium refers to the enclosed, orderly site as well as staging, choreography, and the embodied positioning of audience members to experience the work. Rather than an absolute definition, this terminology serves an evocative function—a means of describing an ambiance, drawing out key themes of a case study, and providing a method of contrasting one somaesthetic scene with another.

Dusk at Stonehenge

Commissioned by the Salisbury Art Festival and choreographed by Nina Rajarani,[19] *Dusk at Stonehenge* used the metaphor of dusk to reflect the comingling of body, nature, and site.

19 Through her company Srishti – Nina Rajarani Dance Creations, Rajarani has experimented with both urban spaces and digital technologies in performances such as *Bend it…* (2009), staged on a soccer field; and the multimedia performance *Quick* (2006), staged both indoors and outdoors. For more information, see srishti.co.uk.

Recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986, Stonehenge (Wiltshire, UK) is comprised of a circle of standing stones, weighing approximately 25 tons each and reaching 4.0 meters high. This prehistoric site invokes a range of associations: a Druidic Temple, an ancient astronomical instrument, a tourist attraction, a symbol of ancient Britain, and a part of England's cultural heritage (Chippindale, 1990). Architecturally, Stonehenge is celebrated for its sacredness (Darvill, 1997), as well as its sonic qualities (Till, 2011). Building on this latter feature, the site's managers organize performances for the celebration of the summer solstice, attended by nearly 20,000 people each year. It is in the context of this annual performance series that *Dusk at Stonehenge* was performed.[20]

If *TooMortal*'s site was transformed into a contained sensorium, *Dusk at Stonehenge* could, in contrast, be viewed as a naturescape, a piece set within an expansive landscape and in relation to elements, such as the setting sun and the ancient stones of Stonehenge, that span beyond human-scale physical and temporal limitations. The pieces diverged in process as well. *TooMortal* toured to numerous venues, but relied on a very specific type of structure and spatial configuration, and was rooted in an intimate connection and contact between dancers' bodies and church pews. *Dusk at Stonehenge* was created for an outdoor festival at the site, but the piece was rehearsed in a studio setting[21] and dancers were prohibited from physically interacting with the ruins.

Nevertheless, *Dusk at Stonehenge* choreographically referenced the site. Spatial patterns mirrored the circle of stones, themes drew upon ancient nature-based rituals and myths, and collaborators aurally embedded the work within the site through a soundscape that superimposed music on the gushing sound of the wind. Green and red costumes, heightened as the light of the setting sun fell across the performance, "were chosen to reflect the resplendence of nature," with green symbolizing the prosperity of the land, and red suggesting rich sunset hues (Subramaniam interview, 2013).

Whereas *TooMortal* drew largely from modern and postmodern dance techniques and aesthetics, *Dusk at Stonehenge* densely relied upon the clear geometry and gravitational pull of Bharatanatyam, echoing the stark architecture and dense stones of Stonehenge. Dancers' stylized walking (Fig. 6) paralleled the erect stones, while the horizontal lintel stones resembled arm extensions foundational to the form (Fig. 7). This choreographic deployment of the dance technique's angularity placed dancers' geometry in constant dialogue with the megalithic stones, while rhythmic sequences contrasted with the fluidity of the grass and expansive landscape. Simultaneously, moments of sensuousness worked to transcend the fixity of Stonehenge, balancing geometry and flow within both dance and site.

Dusk at Stonehenge's composer Kuljit Bhamra adapted the score to the site's existing aural environment through the positioning musicians, including drummers, a vocalist, and voice modulators across the stones. Alongside and through this sound installation, winds at Stonehenge collided with the stones, resonating with a low frequency hum, and adding a layer of "aural architecture"[22] to the site-based performance.[23]

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20 Research into this site-based work was conducted from afar, through video, media, interviews, and publications.

21 *Dusk at Stonehenge* dancer Sooraj Subramaniam described the process in an interview with Banerjee, explaining, "We visited the site once before just to see how we could choreograph the dance. Rehearsal was restricted to a brief run through just prior to the performance" (Facebook interview, April 29, 2013).

22 Barry Blesser and Linda Ruth Salter used the term "aural architecture" to denote the psycho-phenomenological effect cast by the sonic experience of space (2009, p. 3).

23 Dancer Sooraj Subramaniam commented on his experience of the music, recalling that "The music had an ethereal quality simply because it was outdoors, and much of it was improvised…the overall feeling was poetic…the music would resonate between the stones, so it felt as though the music was coming from the stones" (Facebook interview, April 29, 2013).

Figure 6 Stylized walking; **Figure 7** Circular patterns with arm extensions.
Dusk at Stonehenge (2009) by Nina Rajarani. (Photos by Bimala Naysmith)

In addition to physical contrasts and resonances, as well as sonic landscapes, *Dusk at Stonehenge* was thematically tied to the site, foregrounding spiritual connections between humans and nature. Dancers performed a full-bodied bowing salutation to the solar deity; spread into a circle, reinforcing the concentric ring structure of the site (Fig. 7); and utilized gestures signifying holy oblation to the land (Fig. 8). In interviews with co-author Suparna Banerjee, *Dusk at Stonehenge* dancer Sooraj Subramaniam (2013) affirmed the connection between choreography and site, noting that the choreography retraced the histories of the place, animating themes of human relationships with nature.[24] Complementing these more abstract references, the dancers depicted *ganga avatarana*[25]—a mythological tale of the descent of the river Ganga from heaven to earth—thereby symbolically bringing the holy river to Stonehenge, layering and interweaving distinct spiritual sites. The myth denotes not only embodied social life, but also the well-being of the land. By featuring the hydrological cycle (as a marker of livelihood) with its associated myths, Rajarani called attention to the longstanding link between the site and humans, cultures, and histories.

The personal, intimate aspects of human/nature relationships could in part be seen in abstracted sequences based upon the invocatory piece *alarippu*,[26] through which the choreography underlined the blossoming of the self through ritual and in relation to expansive natural referents. Highlighting an atmosphere of shared tranquility, hinging on site, dancer Jahnavi Harrison described the scene, "The sun lowered as we began, floated away as we just enjoyed dancing in the open air, surrounded by rolling fields, staring sheep, and birds circling overhead" (2009). The work concluded with dancers disappearing behind the stones, leaving the lingering sunlight to illuminate the scene. In contrast with the formality embodied by audiences of *TooMortal*, *Dusk at Stonehenge* audiences relaxed on the grass, lounging in a picnic environment caressed by the breeze and engulfed by the setting sun.

24 Subramaniam spoke of the connection of spirituality and place, and the emotion elicited for him through the particular somaesthetic experience of a Bharatanatyam performance incorporating religious myths at an ancient spiritual site: "The stones felt sacred, each…like a deity with personality and compassion" (Facebook interview, April 29, 2013).

25 In Sanskrit, *ganga avatarana* literally means the descent of the river Ganga. In this narrative, Lord Shiva (one of the major deities in the Hindu pantheon), the bearer of the river Ganga, saved the earth from devastation. For more information, see Warrier (2014, p. 41-48).

26 *Alarippu* (literally means blossoming like a lotus) is an invocatory piece of Bharatanatyam repertoire, which features precise isolations of the neck, eyes, and shoulders.

Figure 8 Paying homage to the site, *Dusk at Stonehenge* (2009) by Nina Rajarani. (Photo by Bimala Naysmith)

Atmosphere, Performance, and *Rasa*

In drawing upon somaesthetics to study two site-based choreographies, we have sought to outline the spectrum of elements that inform performer and spectator encounters; variances between sites that influence choreography and somaesthetic experiences; and the relationships that can develop between audiences, performers, and sites in live performance. Each layer offers room for unique somaesthetic analyses—dancer articulation, spectator responses, and the influence of site on each. In combination, we argue that there is a further somaesthetic consideration at play in the durational triangulation of dancers-audiences-sites that occurs during live performance, brought into relief through the example of site-based dance, which offers a revealing lens for unpacking the simultaneous influence of multi-directional experience and response.

Applying somaesthetics to site-based performance provides an avenue for moving beyond the intimate connection between performer and spectator to a perspective that takes in the entire performance environment. In *Thinking Through the Body*, Shusterman described the architectural concept of atmosphere as

> *encompass[ing] the vast array of perceptual qualities, dominant feelings or moods, and ambient effects that emerge not only from the complexity of forms, relations, and materials of the articulated space but also from the complexity of practices, environmental factors, and experienced qualities that pervade the lived space of a building or other architectural structure* (2012, p. 232)

Acknowledging the difficulty of pinpointing a phenomenon that interweaves somatic, psychological, personal, and physically constructed qualities, Shusterman maintained the usefulness of atmosphere in the context of somaesthetics. He noted that "Atmosphere is experienced by the subject as a perceptual feeling that emerges from and pervades a situation; like other perceptual feelings, atmosphere is experienced in large part as a bodily feeling" (2012, p. 234).

Gernot Böhme brought such personal responses to atmosphere into dialogue with design-based counterparts, noting that discussions of atmosphere have spread to discourses ranging from town planning to interior design, radio, and television (2013). In highlighting the conjoined sides of reception and production, Böhme provided added layers to perceiving site-based dance as both drawing upon atmosphere crafted in built space and adding to this atmosphere through lighting, sound, and other staging techniques. Although somaesthetic impacts and personal associations may vary from person to person, Böhme's insights here bring attention to the intentionality behind architecture and staging, wherein site and staging act upon the traverser or audience member in part because they were designed to do so.[27]

Erika Fischer-Lichte underscored Böhme's larger research into atmosphere, emphasizing that atmosphere is not created by any singular element within a space, but rather by "the interplay between all of them which, in theatre productions, is usually carefully crafted" (2008b, p. 75). While *Dusk at Stonehenge* audiences were presented with a seamless outdoor performance featuring themes of human relationships with nature, as with many site-based performances, this encounter was heavily managed. Dancers worked to adjust technique to create an illusion of ease in performing in an unfamiliar environment,[28] musical elements were carefully installed to facilitate an immersion in distinct sounds, and the site was monitored and guarded to ensure preservation.

TooMortal, through the deployment of Dance Umbrella volunteers and engagement of audience bodies, made the management of space visible, while also utilizing subtle staging strategies for lighting and sound. Comparing site-based choreography to partner dancing, Jeyasingh described environments as coming with "a personality." Such personality informed *TooMortal*'s initial creation and has since turned the dance into a "site-reactive" piece, requiring adjustments with every restaging to fit within the unique configurations of each venue (qtd. in Mackrell, 2012). Considering such unseen work highlights that site-based performance goes far beyond surfacing genius loci, and requires intentional crafting, a meeting of choreographer, dancers, and site, facilitated through a spectrum of stagecraft techniques and technologies.

We have explored somaesthetics in the context of dancers via intimate physical interactions with the built environment, choreographic patterns, and dancers' post-performance reflections. These approaches are just a few methods of delving into dancers' dynamic engagement with site, which includes both dancer performance as well as dancers' aesthetic appreciation of the site and performance elements. In addition to their own embodied experiences and responses, dancers participate in the production of atmosphere through rehearsed approaches and in-the-moment responses to both site and audiences.

From the audience side, Fischer-Lichte has described the physical experience of atmosphere, noting that the performance spectator "is not confronted with an atmosphere, is not distanced from it; rather s/he is surround by it, s/he is permeated by it. In this sense, atmosphere is something which is physically sensed" (2008b, p. 76). Site-based performance therefore provides a lens for combining the somaesthetics of atmosphere with embodied experiences of live performance. Writing on *rasa*, Saskia Kersenboom noted that likening performance encounters to cooking "situates cognition in the senses, and turns understanding experiential," emphasizing the "process and physical character of experience" (2007, p. 211). Broadening this metaphor of the tasting of

27 For further examination of the influence of atmosphere, see Griffero (2014).

28 Describing the sensual discomfort involved in translating Bharatanatyam technique to a nontraditional site, Sooraj Subramaniam explained that, "We had choreographed and rehearsed in a studio, so the texture of the grass made it difficult to move initially" (Facebook interview, April 29, 2013).

art, we situate *rasa* within atmosphere to enable a view that encompasses the layers contributed by site, staging, and dancer creativity to the unique character and sensations of performance. In our analysis, this intersection of atmosphere and *rasa* can be seen in the dramatic contrast between the distinctive flavors of *TooMortal*'s sensorium and *Dusk at Stonehenge*'s naturescape.

In addition to revealing the interconnections between situational environment and embodied aesthetic experience, the comingling of atmosphere and *rasa* serves as a reminder of the complex relationships between site and multifaceted individuals. In this article, we have repeatedly written of audiences and dancers in general terms, however, it is important to stress the personal nature of somaesthetic experience as well as the inextricable connection between experience of site and "self-identity" (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). Both sites featured here interweave cultural practices, histories, and religious themes, all of which can elicit a variety of memories and associations. These palpable pasts are complicated by elements of contemporary transcultural identities and power differentials in the UK, elements variously interpreted and felt by choreographers, dancers, and audience members.

Site-based performance may open the possibility of deepening relationships between performers, audiences, and site, yet how this is experienced across individuals is inevitably kaleidoscopic. Elements of community fostered within the delimited performance space and duration remain precarious. Discussing the shared urban landscape of multicultural cities, Shusterman noted, "These streets, through which the city's many classes, cultures, and ethnicities move and mix can create a dynamic, hybrid collective." Yet he balanced this potentiality, recognizing that the "flexibly voluntary" constitution of such collectivity means that, "the same streets can be used to walk away, not just to come together" (2018b [2000], p. 110). This imagery of paths converging and diverging provides an apt illustration of the particular coalescence of performers, audiences, and site present in live performance, intersecting for a brief experiential encounter before dispersing.

Whether cultivating a sensorium, naturescape, or other environment, site-based performance crafts an atmosphere for experience that incorporates visual, auditory, and tactile senses, as well as psychological, historical, and social layers. Rather than finite definitions, the concepts of sensorium and naturescape provide touch points and broad categorizations, examples within an extensive array of site-based somaesthetic qualities. As such they can be understood in part through comparison, both with quotidian spaces passed through beforehand and afterward, and with other performance sites and stagings that provide markedly different somaesthetic environments.

Each of the dance performances outlined above offered a distinct experiential terrain for choreographers/performers and spectators. In discussing these works, we have periodically isolated dancers, audiences, and sites to scrutinize elements of somaesthetic relationships and experiences. However, as Sondra Horton Fraleigh has emphasized, "Time, space, and movement are never separate except in analysis" (1987, p. 178). In this vein, the performative somaesthetic lens provides a framework for viewing individual components as well as their combined impact, positioning dancer, audience, and site within a dynamic relationship that unfurls in shared time/space.

Conclusion

In this paper we have considered the visceral, sensory qualities of the site-based dance performances *TooMortal* and *Dusk at Stonehenge*, which entwined sites, choreography, and

content to produce distinctive aesthetic experiences. Performative somaesthetics has provided a structure for grounding such site-based dance within webs of physical and socio-cultural phenomena, exemplified by the triangulated encounter of dancers, audiences, and sites. We have used performative somaesthetics to unpack dancer agency and artistry, audience experience as an embodied encounter, and site as a frame and immersive vessel for performance. To examine each element is to gain one vantage point on a shifting, mutually dependent, and amorphous relationship. In exploring the particular somaesthetic factors at play within each, and in their interconnection, we work to gain a richer understanding of the distinctive shared context that unfolds during live performance.

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