Walking to Hill End with Victor Turner: A Theater-Making Immersion Event

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It begins in November, three months prior to their commencement of study in Bathurst, New South Wales (Australia). The participants have presented themselves for audition and interview, in the hope of securing one of thirty places within the BA Communication (Theater/Media), at Charles Sturt University. In one room, a woman and a man watch the three audition pieces that each of the applicants has prepared. In another room, two men put questions to the applicants. Many of these are of a type that you would expect to be asked. But some of these questions are surprising insofar as this is an interview for entry into a theater and media studies course.

Do you like to cook? What did you cook recently? Could you cook for thirty people? How would you theatricalise the presentation of this food for your guests?

Do you weld? What sort of experience do you have with power tools? Do you know anything about tying knots and other types of bushcraft?

So, what about bush walking? Do you ever do much of that? Do you like camping? Ever gone camping in remote places?

Could you walk for thirty kilometers?

What are you like to be with when the bush flies are a nuisance and you’re hot, tired, and thirsty? Do people like to be with you at that point?

The two questioners watch the interviewee closely, carefully noting his or her answers and the manner of their responses. Most interviewees are somewhat curious that we would ask such questions. Many answer affirmatively and enthusiastically. Some giggle and allow that, although they would be prepared to do it, they don’t have any experience walking over such distances in the bush. A few say no, they don’t think that they would ever want to do such a thing as that. All responses are duly noted by the interviewers.

Time collapses. It is now late-February during the following year. When the new cohort of thirty First Year students have assembled for their first Theater/Media class, they are reminded of when, during the audition and interview process, they were asked if they were prepared to go camping and take a thirty kilometre bushwalk. Buzz, buzz amongst the neophytes. The lecturer tells them that this is what they will be doing at the conclusion of the third week of classes; so the message is that they are to keep this weekend free for this particular activity.
At this first meeting, they are also told that they will need to organize sturdy walking shoes, clothing that will keep them warm and protect them from the sun, a pack, four litres of water, a sleeping bag, and enough food to feed themself for an overnight camping trip. This is to be a special event for First Year students only. They are going to walk for thirty kilometers along the historic Bridle Track to the old goldmining town of Hill End.

At this juncture, the First Year students usually ask questions about the Second and Third Year students. The answer is straightforward. “No, you’re on your own. The Second Years’ have their ‘circus camp’ on the Turon River a kilometer or so downstream from the village of Sofala, and the Third Years’ are contributing entertainments to the ‘community lantern event’ that the people who live in the hamlet of Turondale hold at this time every year.” In giving this response, the lecturer is deliberately misleading the First Year students. But this dissembling enables each staff member and all of the students to openly discuss their preparations for the three different events that will take place at the end of the third week of the Autumn Semester.

Discussion with First Year students then turns to initial advice about safety issues such as foot care, dehydration, sun protection, snake bite, the danger posed by old abandoned mines, and the need to stay together and not stray from the track. Before the end of the class, the discussion shifts to address the learning purposes that shape the nature of their participation in this weekend retreat into the bush. We explain that we are interested to explore the unmediated interpersonal dimensions of theater-making through storytelling, songs, and jokes. We explain that we are also vitally interested in creating the conditions wherein they can discuss their personal poetics as theater-makers, and why they were motivated to seek admission to this particular course of study.

Before the first class concludes, we explain that the cohort will be split into four groups of “Walkers.” The lecturers will select who walks with whom. Each of these groups are to meet at specified times on the designated Saturday morning, at the loading dock of our building on campus. One of the lecturers will drive them in a bus to a location along the Bridle Track some fifty kilometers from Bathurst. Each group will set off on the Bridle Track at different times. They will be given a map and a schedule that details when and where they are to stop for rests and lunch. They will camp overnight in a well defined campsite that has pit toilets. Each of the campsites is between the Bridle Track and the Macquarie River. They are told that each person is to rehearse two stories, two songs, and two jokes and that they are to be prepared to perform these for their walking companions during the two day trek to Hill End.
Between their first class and their next class during Week Two they are to think about the stories, songs, and jokes that they will tell. They are advised to keep their choices a secret, but to start work on their performances right away. They are urged to get their feet and muscles used to walking, and to start assembling the equipment that they will need by the end of Week Three.

Notices for production meetings to plan these events begin to appear on the bulletin boards around the Theater/Media building on campus. But these notices represent a deliberate ruse designed to mislead the First Year students. The Second and Third Year students are having meetings alright, lots of them. But their discussions have nothing to with a “circus camp” at Sofala, and there is no “community lantern event” for Third Year students at Turondale.

What is going on here? And what does it have to do with Victor Turner? Before reflecting on these connections, a little more background information is necessary in order to explicate the constituent elements of this weekend immersion event.

**Beginnings and Purpose**

The annual Hill End event began in 1989 and it continues into the present time. In the context of Australian higher education, it represents a unique learning and teaching initiative. It derives from the recognition that storytelling in natural settings can provide a framework for understanding the fundamental basis for all theater-making.

During the late-1980s, I was teaching a first year unit of study called, “Drama as a Group Activity”. Part of its curriculum focused on play-building and storytelling. One day, in late-November 1988, my colleague, Bill Blaikie, came into my office and suggested that I should take these First Year students out along the Bridle Track so that they could tell their stories as they walked to the historic gold rush town of Hill End.

I thought that his concept was brilliant. My affirmation of Bill’s proposal was immediate, and my own ‘add’ took but a few moments to formulate. I blurted it out. I was concerned that such a project would call for a very significant effort on my part, and that the return for this investment of time, energy, and money would only be realized as learning yields amongst the First Year students. What we needed, I said, was to use second and third year units of study to provide a basis for the simultaneous participation of all Theatre/Media students in this single weekend event.
At that time, Third Year students had a core unit of study called “Alternative Theatre.” My idea was that they could camp along the river and experiment with site-specific performances, after dark, with the First Year Walkers as their audience. The purpose of this interaction would be to demonstrate that imaginative theatrical performances can take natural environments as their inspiration. Doing so would provide a means for the Third Years to experiment with the types of imagistic performance that they were reading about in *Engineers of the Imagination: The Welfare State Handbook* (Coult & Kershaw 1983). They could exercise their imaginations and practice their skills with non-electrical illumination, site decoration and storytelling while breaking down artificial separations between themselves and the First Year students.

In like fashion, the Second Year students had a compulsory unit of study called “Devised Theatre.” Their role could be to prepare a celebratory feast in Hill End. Bill agreed and told me about the last remaining pub in Hill End, the Royal Hotel (circa 1876). He would contact the proprietors and see if they would be willing to let us use their premises. This arrangement would enable the Second Year participants to design a variety of ceremonies to mark the successful conclusion of the walk by the First Year students, to experiment with the theatricalized presentation of the food that they would prepare, and to organize games and entertainments in the backyard of the pub.

Our excitement mounted as we collaborated to further enlarge the constituent elements of this scenario. This weekend of theater-making was beginning to take shape as a strikingly singular experience that held great promise for stimulating new types of learning, and an opportunity for forging new forms of collaborative interactivity amongst and between each of the three cohorts of Theatre/Media undergraduates. In this moment, Bill and I were having an experience of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1991; Turner 1982). On this particular day we had few pressing affairs, for the semester had concluded and the grades had been submitted. So we were in a relaxed and receptive mood to focus on what the other was saying. We were able to regard our discussion as a game of ideas that had a powerful goal which focused our attention on the larger purposes to which we, as educators, were dedicated. Because we both have a extensive background in improvisation we also brought a playful, open-minded willingness to surrender to the process of the discussion so that we might better understand what the other was trying to communicate. In improvisational terms, this enabled us to take on the point of view of the other and then make a new ‘add’ that would enlarge upon the previous ‘offer’.
The conceptual dimension of the Hill End Project was swiftly fleshed-out. The quality of our “flow” experience made that bit easy. The work that lay before us related to the organization of a plethora of logistical concerns. There would be nearly ninety participants for whom we had to secure transportation, and provide with rudimentary equipment that could support our camping and theater-making purposes.

**Theoretical Influences**

Throughout our professional association, Bill Blaikie and I have both been keen to explore how permaculture design principles can inform the ways in which we think about curriculum development and the use of resources to which we have access. In a 1995 paper to the International Drama Education Association, Bill cited three key permaculture principles (Mollison & Slay 1991: 5) that most clearly express the underlying values which inform the ways in that we think about the multiplicity of resources and energies that are present within the context of our educational collaborations.

At the practical, day-to-day level of conceiving and running the course there are [some] basic principles that we attempt to adhere to. These are:

1. That every placement serve two or more functions;
2. That every function be served in two or more ways;
3. That we hold on to the energy that comes into the system for as long as we possibly can.

(Blaikie 1995: 9)

In the context of the Hill End Project, the “placements” of the Third Year and Second Year participants have multiple “functions” that result in multiple “yields” for the investment of the different types of energy that it takes to secure their presence amongst the First Year Walkers along the Bridle Track (Mollison 1990: 55; Mollison & Slay 1991: 5).

We want all of the First Year ‘Walkers’ to understand, through their experience of the variety of theater-making activities throughout the weekend, that they can claim the right to be the authors of their own transforming presence in the world. They do not have to go into a building in order to experience resonant theatrical performances. They do not have to wait for a playwright to author the words that define the situational conflict in which a narrowly defined assortment of fictional characters struggle, and they do not have to join the ninety-five percent of Australian actors who are unemployed for the great majority of their available time. Rather, the opposite is the case. They will not have enrolled in the BA Communication (Theatre/Media) to train as actors. We make this abundantly clear at the time of their interview and audition. They will have come to Bathurst because they want to enlarge their capacity to innovate using the
principles of performance, of physical theater, of video production, and of educational drama. We want them to experiment with a language that can be learned and then applied in new ways, as a “critical praxis” of “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire 1994: 33).

During the early years of the Hill End Project we were far more concerned to develop these types of understanding, and to realise particular curricular objectives relating to the students’ specific units of study, than we were to investigate what Victor Turner (1990) meant by achieving “communitas” through “rites of limen” within “ritual processes”. That specific concern only became an educational aim eight or so years after the first event when, in 1997, I began to use Turner’s (1967) “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage”, and “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” (1990), as a basis for stimulating discussion about developing a more critical attitude and transformational approach amongst the continuing students in relation to pre-production preparations for their interactions with the First Year Walkers. What is particularly useful, so far as I am concerned, is how these theoretical inputs can be posed as questions to the theater-makers. Such as, “If we accept Turner’s definitions, what types of “threshold crossings” can you design within the context of the theatricalized experiences and social interactions that you are creating for The Walkers?”

During the early years of the Hill End Project, our attention was more attuned to enlarging the students’ capacity to generate site-specific celebratory events (Fox 1991; Coult & Kershaw 1983) by using the design principles that informed Bill Mollison’s (1990) vision about maximizing diverse yields from minimal energy inputs. These concerns and points of view are not inconsistent with the attention given to “rites of limen” (Turner 1990: 10) which aim at altering the knowledge assembly of initiates.

So how are the “rites of limen” experienced by the First Year Walkers? Much of their “threshold crossings” undoubtedly occurs through their experience of dissonance between their expectations prior to setting out from Bathurst and what actually transpires, in both physical and psychological terms, during the next thirty-five hours. Before leaving the campus they are given hand drawn maps and schedules for stopping along the Bridle Track to rest, eat, tell their stories, sing their songs, and sleep. Over the years many students have reported a feeling of unease at the apparent paucity of instructions and the fact that the map, though perfectly accurate in terms of distances and walking times, is hand drawn.
Despite rather detailed briefings about the weekend activity in terms of safety and discussions about camping, many of the First Year Walkers are discomforted by the actuality of fronting up for their departure and by the fact that they will be, unlike most previous educational excursions in their life, beyond the close supervision of a “responsible adult”. These feelings are mixed with a sense of anxiety about being placed in groups of people that they do not know very well and then driven into a bushland setting that is about an hour’s drive outside of Bathurst.

We stop the bus at a point about three kilometers above the valley of the Macquarie River where the immediate landscape is quite uninhabited and distinctly unlovely. The Walkers are let out of the bus and simply told to stick together, follow the schedule, stay on the path, tell their stories, and enjoy themselves. We give them extra water, make sure that everyone has applied their sunscreen, that their hats are on their heads, and then we tell them that we’ll probably drive past them on the track sometime during the day, but that we will definitely be there to pick them up at the Royal Hotel, on the Sunday afternoon, in Hill End. And off they do go.

**Entering a Liminal Landscape**

What they don’t know is that, despite the sun blasted aspect of their immediate departure environment, they are only an easy twenty minute walk away from the sylvan, shade dappled stretches of the Bridle Track as it wends its way alongside the Macquarie River. Just out of sight, within a deep, dramatic fold in the earth, there are vistas that are utterly different from where they now stand. Within a few moments their own feet will have carried them into an environment that will alter the way they think and feel about the nature of this journey. But in the glare and heat of their jump off point they cannot guess at how quickly their experience of the landscape will change.

Nor can they guess at how differently they will feel twenty four hours later, after their night time camping experience, when, in the light of a new day they will have to toil and sweat their way upwards, for seven kilometers, through switchback after seemingly unending switchback, as they walk out of the steeply contoured valley of the Turon River. This will be an ordeal that will test their physical strength, their mental endurance, and their capacity to stay focused on an attainable goal while maintaining a socially pleasant demeanor as a member of a group. Tomorrow they will discover that there is a reason why the gold miners and nineteenth century travelers called this place Hill End.
On this Saturday afternoon, however, as their feet carry them forward along the Bridle Track for the first time, they are entering a psychic, social, and geophysical zone that is “betwixt-and-between the structural past and structural future”; a territory in which they will meet with theriomorphic imagery, with “maskers and clowns, gender reversals, anonymity, and many other phenomena and processes” that define “unique structures of experience… in milieus detached from mundane life and characterized by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, esoteric and paradoxical instructions” (Turner 1990: 11).

The presence of the Third Year participants has been concealed from the First Year Walkers. What they discover when they arrive at their designated campsite is something quite different from what they were led to expect. The Third Year people have been at their campsites since the previous Thursday afternoon. They have an agenda of their own, one which is designed to transform the natural site through the selected use of earth, air, fire and water in order to alter this site in ways that will qualitatively enhance the “subjunctive mood” (Turner 1990: 11-12) of the First Year Walkers. Their initial objective is to shift the normative expectations of The Walkers into a “subjunctive mood” through surprise and the unexpected delight of being welcomed and served by those whom they regard as their seniors within a social hierarchy that they presume is not unlike that which they recently experienced in high school. But the Third Year Walkers are consciously attempting to subvert this assumption on the part of the First Year Walkers in order that they might begin to open themselves up to points of view that embrace the “maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, [and] desire” (Turner 1990: 11)—especially those that attend their most cherished hopes for the three years that they will spend in Bathurst.

To demonstrate that considerable thought and care has been taken to welcome the First Year Walkers to their riverside campground, the Third Year participants prepare the site by using earth, air, fire, and water to:

- artistically define its entry point and boundaries;
- imaginatively and securely shape a very large tarp to shelter both themselves and the First Year Walkers;
- prepare extra food and drink that can be shared communally and thereby supplement the food carried by The Walkers; and
- devise and develop a physically separate area for storytelling—one that is out of sight, away from the camp, requiring that all journey through the darkness to reach that site and return from it.
Moreover, the Third Year participants are enjoined to reflect upon their own poetics as theater-makers by discussing the ways in which their thinking has changed and developed since their First Year when they were The Walkers traversing the Bridle Track to Hill End.

The energy saving and releasing benefits of this exercise are worth considering. It encourages the Third Years to remember their own first year, what their reasons for doing the course were, and are, and how much they have learnt or developed in the past two years. It is a time marker for them. It reminds them that they are in their final year. It allows them to meet the first years in a non-institutionalized site, and to discover the new skills, talent and energy coming into the course.

(Blaikie 1995: 4)

We use four campsites within the wilderness area along the Macquarie River. Each has enough intervening space so that the others cannot see them even if loud vocalizations and/or drumming can be heard through the night air. Usually, the Third Year participants confer some sort of small, defining signification upon the First Year Walkers when they arrive at the campsite. A 2003 Walker reported her impression that “…their camp was an oasis, we had journeyed to somewhere else, and by sharing this experience with other members of our year, we had formed a lifelong bond.” An outward manifestation of their inward experience of “spontaneous communitas” (Turner 1982: 47-48) is often expressed through the use of colored markers such as feathers, beads, headbands or scarves that symbolically join everyone to the site itself, including the Third Year campers. A Walker from 2004 reflected on his experience of site-specific performance at the “Native Dog” campsite in the following terms. “Performance” he says, “…doesn’t have to take place in traditional performance spaces… sometimes the most moving theater is a bunch of people with dog ears (that they made themselves) welcoming you to your place of rest for the evening. In the end, the theater is about the audience, for the audience.” Often these markers of ‘belonging to the site’ feature iconic devices that are also mirrored in rock and wooden formations, or cloth banners, designed by the Third Year campers. Spirals, vortexes, flames, ears and wings are examples of the types of identifiers that have been used to signify their sense of community within the campsite, as they gather in the dusk around the fireside and later, beneath the starry dome of the night sky.

The performance event that the Third Year participants enact for the First Year Walkers typically begins after dark when, as The Walkers relax after dinner, one after another the Third Years quietly slip away to engage their appointed tasks. The Walkers’ sense of ease is disturbed when they are interrupted by illuminations, music and a trickster-styled guide who leads them away
from the known area of the boundaried campsite into the unboundaried, inchoate darkness of the terrain beyond the light of their campfire. Once again, the Third Years use earth, air, fire and water as their tools to affect a theatricalized rite of passage that has the power to transform The Walkers from a random aggregation of recent school leavers into members of the Theatre/Media course who “can assess the growth and skills of the Third Years at close quarters as a measure of what the course will expect them to be able to achieve in the next two years” (Blaikie 1995: 4). A Walker from 2004 expresses this same sentiment when he reflects on his realization that:

   It made me recognize that I was a unique and needed part of a greater cohesive whole. T/M [the Theater/Media course] is a place to let go of our fears and build up our skill sets and emotional/spiritual awareness to allow and encourage peer-based learning.

The effectiveness of their interaction with the First Year Walkers lies in the capacity of the Third Years to demonstrate that evocative and meaningful performances can be collaboratively planned, cooperatively developed, and effectively enacted by any member of the Theater/Media course within any sort of environment. Anywhere can be a site for theater-making. But more than this, the First Year Walkers must come to an understanding that in order for them to enter into the collaborative spirit that underlies theater-making endeavors of this sort, it is absolutely necessary for them to transcend their sense of self-importance by acknowledging their present fears and releasing them, and by defining their hopes for the future and resolving to pursue them.

Through their engagement with the performative interactions proposed by their Third Year ‘elders,’ this transformation is symbolically accomplished in a variety of ways. In some cases they write down their fears and release them in little paper boats on the river. Later, they are called upon to disclose their reasons for wanting to gain admission to this course and asked to articulate their hopes for the future. In other cases they confide their fears by telling them to trees or prominent rock formations and then immerse themselves in the river, are cleansed with eucalypt smoke, or mask themselves with daubs of earth and walk along the path of a large spiraling maze of firepots upon the ground in order to re-center themselves at a new axis mundi. In other cases, they write down their fears and their hopes, casting their fears into a fire and setting their hopes adrift in the river. In any case, they are beginning to understand that their time in Bathurst represents a journey of self-discovery and they can now, after only three weeks, see a horizon of experience that lies in a future that they can envision, for they now know that they will be returning to the Bridle Track, in two years time, with new points of reference, knowledge, and understanding. Just as they will now withdraw from the performance space and
return to their campsite as differently-minded persons than those who left that fireside a short time before.

There is a wide laterality of performance-based experience to which the First Year Walkers are subjected by their Third Year ‘elders’. The use of the immediate, site-specific landscape and the creative employment of earth, air, fire, and water is a common denominator amongst all four encampments. So is the use of story-making imagery that takes the site itself as the prime source of inspiration; for the Third Year campers have been instructed to let the site ‘speak’ to them so that the storyline that they develop for their performative event emerges from the ways in which they, the Third Years, join their imagination to the ‘spirit’ that they discern in the specific locality of their riverside encampment. A Walker from 2004 expressed her riverside experience in the following terms:

   It opened up my mind about the possibilities available in the environment. The river, trees, open space and river banks, were all transformed into a magical performance space where music, fire, and storytelling were interwoven to create a unique atmosphere. One standout moment for me was a violin player standing in the rapids. The juxtaposition of the natural and artificial was very potent.

Yet these diverse threshold crossing “rites of limen” are designed by the Third Years to use the evocative power of their performance event to help the First Year Walkers confront themselves and make self-determined affirmations about what they hope to accomplish through the investment of three years of their lives in a university course that has taken them away from their homes, their family, and their friends, and everything that has hitherto been familiar and predictable.

These performance events are never merely something that happens to the First Year Walkers. They must take an active role in its unfolding through the physical journey that everyone makes to the performance site, the way(s) in which they accept the variety of gifts and talismanic markers of their changing status, and the ways in which they think about and express their present fears and hopes for the future. One Walker reflected upon the transformative power of this experience as she shares her thoughts about the experience that she and her group had with the Third Year theater-makers along the banks of the Macquarie River in 2004.

   Discovering that these people had gone to so much trouble to welcome me, and arrange celebratory rituals—well, it moved me beyond words. I started to think, maybe I do belong, maybe I do have something to contribute. The ritualistic ‘burning of our fears’, for me, seemed a key
[moment of] transformation. They were trying to help transform our thinking from attitudes of fear, insecurity, [and] doubt to courage and a sense of being valued, appreciated, and free to try new things.

Their return from the performance site to the campsite marks the beginning of a new phase in their lives as members of the Theater/Media course. All wear signs of their unity and identification with the ‘spirit’ of their campsite. The ‘spirit’ of this site has now been impregnated with the transforming presence of a micro-community that exemplifies the “dialectical nature” of liminal experience.

…which moves from structure to anti-structure and back again to transformed structure; from hierarchy to equality; from indicative mood to subjunctive mood; from unity to multiplicity; from the person to the individual; from systems of status roles to *communitas*, the I-thou relationship, and Buber’s “essential We” as against society regarded as “It.”

(Turner 1986: 127-28)

In returning to their campsite, they continue to be served by the Third Years. But it is not yet time for sleep. They are asked by the Third Years to share their stories, tell their jokes, and sing their songs, and for all to enjoy together the comradeship that comes with eating, drinking, and sleeping together near a fire, beside a river that runs into the darkness of the night and murmurs in the background of their dreams.

In the morning they are fed breakfast by the Third Years and everyone is given additional sustaining trail food, and a personal gift that has been made by one of the Third Years. They are told to stay on the track, follow the schedule, enjoy the walk, and “stick together on ‘The Hill’!”

And off they do go. “Good-bye! Don’t rush! Stick together!”

**Celebrating the Achievement of The Walkers**

Meanwhile, the Second Year participants have been camping together, in one location, on the outskirts of Hill End, since Friday afternoon. Their job is to design a sequence of performative moments that celebrate the achievement of The Walkers when they finally arrive at the Royal Hotel.

During their three weeks of preparation, the Second Year participants research and identify a coterie of character types that would have peopled Hill End during the gold rush era. They make decisions about the personae that they will assume and then begin to assemble their costumes and
decide upon the nature of the interactions that will take place between these characters and The Walkers when they arrive in town on Sunday afternoon. In conducting this dramaturgical research they are particularly looking for stories of the daily concerns of the people of those times. What they add, as theater-makers, includes the use of music, circus, the preparation and presentation of food, as well as the conduct of a variety of games and whimsical performances for the entertainment of all.

There are some specific moments throughout the Sunday afternoon that mark our celebration of the achievement of The Walkers. In particular, these feature a rousing reception in the street in front of the Royal Hotel using song and physical theater to welcome "The Walkers" to Hill End. They are relieved of their packs and are run through a gauntlet of applause and expressions of welcome from staff, current students, and returning graduates. This facilitates their transition from the street in front of the pub to the courtyard at the back of the hotel. At the end of this symbolic birth channel, they are given a gift of beer and taken by Second Year “harlots”, “preachers”, “undertakers”, and other character types, into the shade of a row of peppercorn trees. There they have their feet washed and receive foot, leg, and back massages while they drink their beer. Meanwhile, other Second Year participants are completing the food preparation, organizing games such as horseshoes or badminton, and playing music as they move about from group to group of participants. One Walker from 2004 reflected upon this experience in the following terms:

I think the Second Years were trying to strengthen the sense of community that the Third Years had introduced us to, by dressing up as a community of Hill End settlers and as we arrived we were each greeted individually by a Second Year which gave us the feeling that they had made an effort to get to know who we were! Also, as they washed our feet, massaged our backs, and gave us beer and food, they were showing us how a community is not only there to work together collectively but also to take concern and care for each member of the community individually.

Approximately one hundred people associated with the Theater/Media course are present for this afternoon celebration. As well, there are an equal number of local onlookers and curious tourists. What follows is a feasting phase in which the Second Year students must devise a well-focused theatricalized presentation of the food using song and parade to organize its distribution, starting with the First Year Walkers and ending with the lecturing staff. After which, the Second Year people use live music, acrobatic balances, tumbling and/or unarmed combat to focus the attention of all participants on a more formal entertainment phase of the celebrations.
This is the moment when the Second Years provide ironic meta-commentary on the arrival of The Walkers and our shared return to Hill End. Usually they find ways to gently lampoon the lecturing staff and then call upon those who have been walking and camping along the Bridle Track to present short performances that reflect on the character of their experience. Here, the Second Years act as interlocutors to introduce the short performances that have been specifically devised by each of the four groups of Walkers. Their walking schedule for Sunday includes the request that they come up with some sort of song and physicalized performance that expresses the nature of their group’s experience over the past twenty-four hours. The Second Year presenters also call upon the four groups of Third Year campers to perform their own ironic commentary upon their interaction with the First Year Walkers who arrived in their camp. In this way, all the cohorts of participants are empowered to express “sentiments of social solidarity” through pithy songs and physical comedy that enable all participants to enact a story that “tells itself about itself” (Turner 1982: 104 quoting Geertz 1980). One Walker from 2004 expressed her sense of “social solidarity” when she and her fellows completed the long climb up “The Hill” only to discover a new threshold-crossing experience.

The Second Years again surprised us. Our feelings of the journey ending as we reached the top of The Hill were only momentary, and suddenly we realized in fact the journey was just beginning. They welcomed us with music and dance. They knew our names and gave us presents. No matter who we were they were all around us making us feel so much a part of the TM [Theater/Media] group.

A Walker from 2003 reported feelings of elation that is echoed in the remarks of the majority of her peers.

It made me consider the aspects of theatre as celebration. Previously theatre had just been [an experience in a] black box for me. I hadn’t been part of an unaware audience before. I felt the kind of surprise and wonder that I hadn’t felt since the Christmas’ of my childhood. At the moment of greeting at the Royal Hotel, I was overwhelmed by the sheer excitement that these strangers had about greeting me and celebrating my achievement.

The dispersal phase of the celebration begins with a comic farewell song by the Second Year celebrants and directions for everyone to pack their belongings into the assembled cars and buses. The Second Years carefully clean the site and return the backyard of the Royal Hotel to its original appearance and then follow the cavalcade back to Bathurst. The students stow their gear and all organize to meet at a local pub to share stories and chat with another about what happened amongst their different groups throughout the weekend.
Reflecting on Purpose and Process

Our specific intentions have always been to affect a shift in the participants’ perceptions about their capacities to think and act as creative innovators and to recognize that they do not need to wait for others to write their scripts. So we use this immersion event as a rite of passage that demonstrates to everyone involved that we must claim artistic agency as theater-makers who can collaborate with others to create original entertainments and meaningful cultural performance events. This is the sensibility that lies at the heart of the design intentions that we, the academic staff, had in mind when we created this weekend immersion event as a rite of passage within a higher education setting. It is this value which is held to be “sacred”—and all the tasks that are undertaken by each cohort of undergraduates are meant to challenge them to clearly communicate their ideas with one another and collaborate effectively to enact the “performative” events (Kershaw 1999: 12-20; Carlson 1996: 195) which are designed to affect a shift in thinking amongst the First Year Walkers. The efficacy of this transformation lies in the degree to which we can foster new ways to assist them in having regard for their own creativity and recognize that the potential for theater-making is an open horizon of possibility. For all members of the course the purpose of this immersion event is to nurture the realization that they too have the right, indeed the duty, to “follow their bliss” to use the language of Joseph Campbell (1988: 120). There is general consensus amongst The Walkers that what is “shown”, “done” and “said” (Turner 1967:102,103) during this weekend immersion event, enables them to reflexively examine and test their own creative capacity to generate resonant theatrical experiences. The reflections from two 2004 Walkers are instructive on this point:

I was very used to associating the theatre with a professional stage, costumes, etc., and being ‘separated’ from it [the performance] as an audience member. I was very moved by the Third Year’s performance because it was all about the audience; it formed itself from the surrounding nature and thus was very raw and beautiful. It also taught me that theatre can come from anywhere.

The weekend opened my mind to the potential for performance as a site-specific event and a celebratory and cathartic experience… Because of its intimacy, and alien context, the Third Year’s night performance was very inspiring in creative terms. The Second Year performance gave added point to this experience and overwhelmed me to the point of mesmerizing awe. Their site-specific characterization placed me personally in an historical context, which reminded me that I now belonged to a very old and wise culture of performance/theatre whose power was and can be evoked in any other performance.

Our more recent emphasis upon Turner’s ideas concerning the “rites of limen” as outward manifestations of “ritual processes” within “genres of cultural performance” (1990: 14) has
enabled us to explicitly discuss the different types of physical, psychic and social threshold crossings that are embedded within the Hill End Project. For the transformative aims and intentions of this project were always present, right from the beginning, in the very first event in 1989. It is just that in those earlier years we explained what we were doing in different terms, for Turner’s schema was not our original inspiration. In those days, we were much more concerned to explain what we were attempting to do by discussing it in terms of making experiments with the sorts of community-building experiences that could be promoted through story-based celebratory performances of the type that is exemplified through the work of Welfare State International (Coult & Kershaw 1983; Fox 1991). Yet, the fact that we did not consciously construct and explain the Hill End Project as a “liminal” experience did not, of course, obviate its potency as a transformative experience that is taken in the company of others. For each of the elements of a “rite of passage” (Turner 1982, 1990) are present within the processual unfolding of the experience that each cohort of Theater/Media undergraduates engages from the time they leave Bathurst until the time that they return to their beds on Sunday night.

From our departure from Bathurst onward, everyone, including the academic staff, becomes immersed within an “irreversible” immersion within a liminal experience whose sequence of activity—though particularized to specific cohorts of individuals—evidences a “unidirectional movement [that] is transformative” (Turner 1982: 80). Throughout this period of “separation” the individuals within each cohort experience a type “liminal communitas” that places them within an “experience of egalitarian solidarity and spiritual integration, especially typical of initiatory rites of passage” (Lewis & Dowsey-Magog 1993: 201 referring to Turner 1969). This chapter has discussed how, within this liminal landscape, decisions must be collectively negotiated and then expressed through symbolic role-taking whose purpose lies in theatricalized social communication.

These communication initiatives represent deliberate attempts to both subtly and explicitly mark moments in time when the Walkers must “cross” a variety of psycho-social and physical thresholds. In all cases—whether walking and storytelling, or creating a decorated campsite and a site-specific performance alongside the river, or the festive welcome that celebrates the achievement of The Walkers at the historic Royal Hotel in Hill End—each cohort of students is immersed in a weekend of theater-making challenges that cannot properly be concluded until these symbolic activities have taken place prior to their reintegration into their erstwhile “normal” lives in Bathurst. These “rites of limen” are cohort specific, but each interaction with the First Year Walkers emphasizes new ways in which the older students welcome the initiates
into the true community life of the course. These performative acts demonstrate how and why this course is different from other undergraduate courses within the larger community of students within the university. At the conclusion of the event, Walkers have a changed status as people with new knowledge—and a special bond—with the other students and the staff of the Theater/Media course. Their final welcome, as full members of the course, takes place through a type of informal debriefing about what they have all just experienced during the Hill End immersion weekend. Typically, this is transacted over a few beers at a local pub when they return to Bathurst when all three years of students can mix and mingle to share their stories about the weekend experience and to ease themselves back into the life of their local community in a provincial university town.

**Conclusions**

The Hill End Project finds its most important expression as a type of “neo-liminal engagement” (Lewis & Dowsey-Magog 1993: 207) amongst like-minded individuals who seek a type of liberation through symbolic forms of expression. It gains a significant degree of its power from the way in which everyone’s “neo-liminal” experience of seclusion in the company of their year-specific cohorts facilitates theatricalized communication initiatives that are “particularly conducive to ‘ludic’ invention” (Turner 1982: 31-32). Here, their experience of “anti-structure” lies in the way that they report their growing awareness that powerful theatrical experiences can take place in spaces that transcend the limitations of “black box” theater. As this awareness grows, they begin to experience the realization that there are a vast diversity of sites and events that call forth new potentialities for theatricalized human expression and that these represent opportunities that “can generate… a plurality of alternative models for living, from utopias to programs, which are capable of influencing the behavior of those in mainstream social and political roles… in the direction of radical change” (Turner 1982: 33). These expressive acts transpire within a spirit of “communitas” through which participants redefine themselves as innovative theater-makers, and thereby claim a new type of relationship to Australian society through their exercise of artistic agency. The “performance efficacy” (Kershaw 1992) of the Hill End Project lies in the degree to which the participants subsequently seek to use their talents in order to exercise a humanizing influence upon “the historical evolution of wider social and political realities” (Kershaw 1992: 258). This is happening, through the work of the graduates of the course, but it is a story that will continue to unfold through the evolvement of their generation’s contribution to the social capital of Australian life.
References


The hyperlink below is among the better ones for the early Hill End collection maintained by the New South Wales State Library. It offers hundreds of images taken during the zenith of the nineteenth century goldrush in Hill End. Many of these images now appear upon interpretive placques that have been erected along the streets of contemporary Hill End. The pictures usually appear at the sites of long-gone dwellings or public buildings. 


On Wednesday, 2 March and Thursday, 3 March 2005, I surveyed the two cohorts of undergraduates who were First Year Walkers during 2003 and 2004. At the time of the survey, they were preparing to undertake their appointed tasks as Second and Third Year participants in the 2005 Hill End Project. All respondents gave written permission to use all or part of their responses in articles intended for publication. This permission was given on the understanding that whilst they identified themselves and gave signed authorisation for me to use their written reflections, this authority stipulated that they would not be identified by name. I have retained all responses and intend to use the survey data as the basis for a qualitative longitudinal study that will be based upon a five-year sample.