

Asterion: A Journey through the Labyrinth

Research summary and analysis - July 2004

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Introduction:

Asterion: A Journey through the Labyrinth is a research project that explores the design of a unique set of interrelated theatrical events with the aim of continuing the evolution of specialized design work in environmental theater, while at the same time breaking new ground in theatre design as a whole. This research will provide the basis for the realization of a major work of theatre, in which a complex and enveloping environment will be created around the narrative. Through its scope and complexity, and the themes of identity and self-discovery, this project makes a significant contribution to the richness and diversity of our culture.

My work over the past twenty four years has primarily been in collaboration with composer and visionary R. Murray Schafer. In Asterion, Schafer has created the blueprints for a particularly unusual and challenging work. Part of the Patria Cycle of Music/Theatre works, Asterion (Patria 7) fits with RA and The Enchanted Forest as works that embody a journey of self-discovery. Based on the Cretan myth of Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur (a myth which resonates through all of the Patria works) Asterion draws on references as diverse as Jung and the Baghavad-Ghita.

The text outlines a series of approximately fifty events each with its own unique environment. Both the form and content of the work are that of the labyrinth. The project lies at the intersection of theatre, architecture, and installation art and is intended as a transformative journey through a series of intertwining passages and rooms to be experienced by one person at a time. In Patria, the labyrinth stands as a metaphor for the search for personal and cultural identity and Asterion is intended to make that search manifest.

Context and team members:

This research is being carried out in steps over a number of years.

The initial planning has been done by a small group of individuals including R. Murray Schafer (the originator of the text), Jerrard Smith (University of Guelph Theatre Artist and designer of the Patria series), Diego Agudelo (Architect), Melissa Barron (a University of Guelph graduate student in Landscape Architecture) and Erica McNeice (a University of Guelph graduate student in Drama) along with consultants from a number of disciplines (Architecture, Structural Engineering, Film and Media Studies, Landscape Architecture, Fine Arts). With this group as the core, the objective is to create a community of participants to develop the physical structure and to refine the dramatic component through a series of workshops.

Methodologies:

As time and resources allow, I am organizing a series of workshops to develop the theoretical and physical framework for Asterion as well as build a community of participants.

At present, the members of the core group all have different but compatible ways of approaching the project and it is this diversity of approach that I believe will ultimately produce the most effective results. While Schafer, Agudelo and myself have presented drawings indicating a shape or notes leading toward a definition of form for the work, we have generally agreed to allow additional experimentation to inform the shape of the labyrinth. We will work from the inside out and then compare our hypothetical plans with the results of the experiments.

We have agreed on a number of basic elements:

- There are advantages to be gained by creating a full size model of some of the areas that were described in the text and to try the texts with an actor and a participant within those spaces.
- The particular attributes of any given section of the terrain will be allowed to influence the design decisions.
- The work will be allowed to grow as an organic process without imposing restrictions until a certain level of complexity has developed. That level will be defined as part of the process.

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The long-term plan will change but the model we followed this summer and described below was very successful and will be continued. We will combine planning sessions with practical work and follow with daily discussions and analysis as we proceed, documenting the results as thoroughly as possible.

Preplanning:

This plan will be followed for each stage (always building on previous work)

Grant applications and requests for in kind donations

Scheduling and production timelines

Permits and permissions

Division of responsibilities and site infrastructure

The Workshop Process

It is common in theatre practice to hold workshops to develop scripts. The playwright and director would normally conduct readings with actors to get a better sense of flow and structure in the text. But beyond the building of maquettes, designers rarely have a similar opportunity, yet the possibilities for advancing the design that can be achieved by trying out the ideas using full-scale models and having actors interact with the design elements, can be equally rewarding.

The Asterion project expands on this approach by involving participants from a variety of disciplines that can each bring a different perspective to the problems and hopefully realize unique solutions. The scale and scope is larger than what would be encountered in any traditional theatre context, as the terrain to be explored covers several acres. The originator of the work (Schafer) is involved as a participant and is amenable to change in the text based on the results of the experimentation. Finally, the participants are camping on site, working as a closely knit community which allows for and in fact encourages a more complete immersion in the process.

Analysis and discussion involves all the participants and is largely interpretive. There are discussions during the process on a daily basis and each participant is asked to complete a summary report. These reports are appended in their entirety and referenced in this document. This method of documentation allows for a variety of interpretations based on the diversity of the participants' disciplines. This paper represents a summation of these activities. The results will be distributed among the group for ongoing feedback and will form the basis for the next stage of development. By publishing this document on the Patria web site, I hope to include a broader public in the process and thus to gain additional interest and support.

I hope to be able to continue these workshops over the next three years, always increasing the number of participants who make up the community.

Summer Workshop 1 - July 2004 Indian River

I was fortunate in securing some grant money from the University of Guelph for this preliminary exploration. Our team consisted of Schafer, Smith, McNeice, Barron, Diana Smith (Patria costume designer), Samantha Brown (research assistant) and Claire Heistek (volunteer/kitchen coordinator). Diego Agudelo was unfortunately unable to attend. We agreed to spend from July 1 to July 9 on site with a public workshop scheduled for July 9-12. This workshop was promoted through the Patria web site (www.patria.org) and the newsletter that is sent to supporters of Patria works. This ensured that the participants were somewhat familiar with and predisposed toward the kind of work under consideration. (Future development will expand the boundaries of this group.)

Site:

The site for the initial workshop is a parcel of land on Schafer's property, although recent developments with the Patria works at large might favour a resituating of the labyrinth. This and the limited resources for the initial phase (both financial and human) informed our decision to not create any permanent structures. However, the location does provide ample variety of terrain for a thorough exploration. The area under consideration involves open grassy field, cedar woods, wetlands and maple/beech forest. We have obtained municipal permissions



to build in limited areas of this terrain should this site be the final location.

Materials:

Our plans involved experimenting with a range materials, tools and supplies in order to try as many approaches as we could but based on gentle interventions with the existing landscape. These materials include fabric, rope and twine, straw bales, pruning and trimming tools, saws, axes, rakes and shovels. We were fortunate in securing the loan of a backhoe/front end loader, water truck for washing and cleanup and a 4WD vehicle with trailer as well as the donation of truckloads of sand and gravel.

Initial activities:

Site setup:

We have a large tent which we set up for kitchen/meeting/materials. We had portable toilets. There is no electricity on site. We built a firepit and had propane stoves for cooking.

We began by following the method of planning - doing - analyzing as outlined above. We wanted to be start by ensuring that we all had at least a superficial feel for the landscape and so did a simple experiment.

Blindfolded, we agreed to walk slowly across the terrain (open field area) and stop when it felt right to do so. We did this twice and it was interesting to note that each time, we tended to separate from each other and head toward remote corners of the field.

Next, as we had agreed on creating a section of the labyrinth that would wind from cedar forest to grassy field and back, we were all anxious to explore the forest. We decided to cut a path into the cedars and allow the natural spacing of the small trees to inform the route. Our intent was to examine the meanders that were suggested by the configuration of the trees in a limited area but again our natural inclination was to expand the path to encompass the entire perimeter of the land under investigation. As we proceeded, we found that any route taken had potentially interesting shapes. We found the forest to be less deep than we had thought and soon came upon an ancient split rail fence. We crossed this and continued through terrain that was mixed (some cedar woods, some more open areas with scrub brush, some tall grasses) and eventually came to the beaver pond. This was a known area with a path leading from the field already established. We began to head back to the field and ended up veering through more mixed terrain and eventually ending up at the far end of the field. What we had done in fact was create a path parallel to the edge of the field on two sides. Again our search for the path that felt right took us to the extreme ends of the property.

Next, we went back to the fence and continued in the opposite direction. We discovered the beech/maple forest area, a section of the cedar woods where several vehicles and pieces of machinery had been abandoned and a wide clear path lined with large cedars that we soon began to call the "cedar arcade". This trail came out into another field adjacent to the field where we began and we had now circled our central field on three sides.

We liked the path we had created for its diversity both in shape/configuration and in terrain/flora. We have a lot to begin working with. We still want to create a structure of some sort with straw bales and we still want to explore the light/dark transitions by creating paths that run from field to forest and back.

The donated sand, gravel, cement and backhoe arrived at our site early on the second day.

We learned the geometry of basic labyrinths.

We identified a need to determine which environments would be suitable for the events as described in the text. We now have a long path with varied flora and terrain, a flat area of field for a rudimentary straw bale structure, and the plans for a light/dark labyrinth. For this, we defined a path based on the basic labyrinth "formula" with variations in the amount of meander within the forest area and an attempt to maintain the geometry in the field area. Within the forest area we found a single birch tree and decided that this would be the centre. We discovered limitations in how far we could go before coinciding with the woodland path.

Some areas were readily defined as enclosed paths by virtue of the amount of forestation (density) as we cut through; others required significant infill to define the path and to obscure other path areas. The latter was addressed by weaving cut branches and this allowed for significant artistic expression as individual project members took on the design of these areas and thus became owners of those sections of the path. Cedar branches were woven in patterns then filled in to create a screen. Arches were created by bending young cedars adjacent to the path (and some routes were chosen with this in mind). Sculptural elements were incorporated (eg. a circular opening within a pyramid shape) as a focal area within a path segment. We all became quite obsessed with the process of creating and refining these paths, working in pairs or individually. We feel that the ultimate labyrinth will be constructed with this same sense of authorship of an individual segment.

In the open field, we erected large cedar poles secured with ropes and hung fabric panels to create walls. At this stage, we are yet happy with the results and will continue to explore ways to make this structure more effective.

The Straw Bale Labyrinth

We used the earth mover to level a circular area at one end of the field to create a straw bale structure using bales obtained from a neighbouring farm. Limited time meant we only used a few bales to get a sense of the material. We created a formal labyrinth in a series of rectilinear paths using stakes and twine with the bales as a walled area in the centre. The paths were enhanced with gravel and stones. We took this area to be the starting point and created a path from the centre to join up with the trail at the end of the field. Erica and Melissa spent some time working on the transition from one type of labyrinth and one type of terrain to another. These transitions became very important as we began to analyze the route in terms of the text.

Weekend workshop preparation:

We now had three distinct areas to work with: the straw bale labyrinth, the long path and the forest/field labyrinth. Although still requiring more work, we felt we must stop and plan for the weekend when we would have seven new people joining us. We wanted to involve these new participants in experiencing the text in areas of the structure we had created, as well as the opportunity to do some hands-on work themselves. We also wanted their input and feedback on everything. We decided to set up a few of the scenes with our core group as ‘actors’ and have the new people walk through the entire route individually. The next day, we would reverse the roles and let them be the actors.

Forest Encounters - Drawing on The Wolf Project as laboratory.

Many of the ideas that inform the development of Asterion come out of the experimental Schafer work *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* (Patria - the Epilogue) in which approximately 65 participants travel each August to a remote wilderness location bringing camping supplies, food, props costumes and musical instruments to engage in a week of ritual theatre. Part of this process involves a series of ‘forest encounters’, where participants from three of the four sites travel to the fourth to experience a theatrical presentation, the details of which may vary from year to year and it is here that many performer-audience interactions are tried and developed. One of these is the stone ritual.

The Stone Ritual

This simple exchange is a meditation which we set up for the weekend workshop. Melissa Barron took on



the role of the storyteller/keeper of the stones. She positioned herself seated in the centre of the cedar labyrinth - a circular area large enough for two people.

The participant follows the meandering paths in and out of the cedar woods and eventually arrives at the “centre” as defined by a circular space containing a birch tree and a seated figure. It is very natural for him/her to sit which immediately changes the perspective, focus, feel - everything. The attention or focus which had until now been directed outward toward the structures defining the path suddenly shrink to a smaller and more intimate space. The keeper of the stones indicates a semicircle of small stones of varying colours, sizes and shapes and invites the neophyte to choose one. The chosen stone then becomes the focus of a series of meditations: accepting the

‘energy’ of the stone, passing your energy to the stone, holding the stone to your forehead to exchange thoughts with the stone etc. With the use of simple costume, a candle, incense and the natural surroundings, this small experiment was deemed to be one of the most effective as a transformative experience.

Daedalus - technology and machines

Daedalus, the inventor/architect of the labyrinth is depicted in the text as a robotic humanoid moving to the sounds of the techno world, bridging the technologies of the ancient world and our own. The abandoned cars formed a suitable backdrop for the encounter with Daedalus (although we recognized the inappropriate location in terms of sequence of events). We tried to further enhance the techno-mystery of the encounter

by planting a walkie- talkie (FRS) unit inside one of the cars while a portion of the text was read from a remote area (but within eye sight to maintain conversational possibilities).

Balance: Nothing is definitive in these experiments; they are just that - attempts to take what is there and try to find the extents of possibilities inherent in any given circumstance. It is process, it is play and it is learning to do. Finding a place on a path, choosing a piece of text from the script. One person reading became two echoing the same text from either side of the path and passing a pendulum slowly back and forth. We create little events to gently enhance the path and the surroundings. There is so much in the tangle of branches overhead that little is often too much in terms of our interventions.

Fabric walls

Using another quick and easy technique to fabricate temporary structures, we used some of the cedars that were cut to create the paths as supports for ropes and fabric. I had brought some metres of wide fabric which we hung to create a narrow tunnel leading out of the woods and back in. There is a section described in the text that delivered by presumably another neophyte who is just a thin wall away and who whispers urgent warnings. This was accompanied by physically holding and touching us as we walked through. The feedback was generally positive with suggestions about pacing and delivery. The white colour was found to be obtrusive in this environment. The tunnel provided one experience and the outside another as the fabric became wings for an encounter with Icarus.

We dug a trench around the perimeter of the field/forest labyrinth and suspended some green sheer fabric (much more pleasing) from tall poles.

The weekend was very successful. The 'neophytes' (as the audience members are called in the text) arrived on Friday evening and we introduced everyone and talked about the work. The next morning, they were taken to the beginning of the route individually at 15 minute intervals and invited to walk through while we read sections of the text at various points along the way. This was followed by discussion and plans for the roles to be reversed. The neophytes felt they could improve on what we had done and set out to practice and to do some building of their own. We ended the day with a swim, a feast and a campfire.

The next morning, the workshop participants continued to prepare and we went through the route in the early afternoon. More discussion followed and we spent some time putting things away. Clarke Mackey and I walked the route once more, Clarke making a video recording of the walk while I photographed the various textures of the path underfoot.

Addenda:

Summaries of the workshop participants ([downloadable pdf file](#). 140kb)