



Research Report 2006

Asterion: A Journey Through the Labyrinth:

Summary and analysis of year three of a five-year exploration of theatrical space

June 20 - July 19, 2006

Background

Jerrard Smith, theatre designer and researcher at the University of Guelph has spent much of the past 25 years working in collaboration with composer and visionary R. Murray Schafer on the realization of the works of the Patria Cycle of music dramas. There are 12 parts to the Cycle, which are linked thematically and which are predicated on a profound recognition of our need to reestablish a connection with the planet and the physical environment.

In his text for Asterion, composer R. Murray Schafer has created the blueprints for a particularly unusual and challenging work, describing a series of forty-five events each with its own unique environment. Both the form and content of the work are that of the labyrinth. The work lives 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.

Years one and two were on a modest scale but still produced significant results (see research reports for 2004, 2005). 2006 saw the beginning of a three-year process funded by SSHRC, with a longer period of on-site work and involving more participants than earlier years.



2006 Team

The 2006 team was composed of R. Murray Schafer (originator of text), Jerrard Smith (designer), Garrick Filewod (documentation consultant), Jim Gleason (straw bale wall construction consultant), Bruce Grant (structural engineer), Barbara Guy-Long (planting consultant), Diana Smith (planting consultant), Tina Therrien (straw bale wall finishing consultant), Danny Wild (kitchen supervisor, dancer, performer), Sarah Albu, Andrea Bennett, Emily Bingeman, Samantha Brown (design assistant), Michael Chudnovsky, Ben Dugas, Max Evans, Jessie Fraser, Leigh Gillam, Benjamin Henderson, Sanyong Kim, Rob Murphy, Ryan Ogilvie, John O'Regan, Karl Skene, Sylvie Smith, Eric Stewart, David Wilkins and Simon Zaborski (undergraduate research assistants), Sue Balint, Annie Dunning, Kate Galloway and Maria Michails (graduate research assistants), Heather Davis (production manager), Judith Brisson, Scott Fisch, Colin Mack, Erica McNiece and Judith Parker (volunteers).



The straw wall builders

Funding and Donations

The 2006 project was primarily funded through a three year SSHRC Fine Arts Creation Grant. The project received donations of sand, gravel, mortar and cement from Dufferin Aggregates (\$15,000.00), the use of a front-end loader/backhoe for the month from Battlefield Cat Rentals (\$10,000.00),

drinking water from Rocky Ridge water (valued at \$450). Garrick Filewod, Barbara Guy-Long and Diana Smith generously donated their services as consultants and workshop participants contributed a small fee. We also received an additional donation from one of the workshop participants.



Work Process

There were a number of fully planned projects and general guidelines for other work assignments. All the participants worked and camped together on site with the understanding that there would be ongoing discussion and that everyone's input in any and all aspects of the production was welcomed. Participants worked as members of teams responsible for specific tasks (construction, landscaping, sculpture, mapping, documentation and kitchen). In general, work began around 8 am and continued until 4 or 5 p.m., with a break for lunch around noon. On very hot days, participants sometimes took a longer lunch break to swim and relax and then worked until 6 or 7 p.m. Discussions and text work generally occurred either before or after dinner, after the bulk of the day's work was complete.

While the 2004 research was concerned with spatial and textual exploration and 2005 was focused on construction, 2006 combined planned construction and experimentation with creating performance spaces. Because this year's project involved more people and more tasks than 2004 or 2005, it was necessary to be careful with organizing people and resources so that work could happen efficiently. Each work team had a person designated as team leader (either informally or formally). The production manager was responsible for ensuring that each team had the people and resources it needed.

It was important that the entire group met regularly so that all participants were aware of what others were doing and of how work was progressing in each area. While the work process was very flexible and allowed for participant input and discussion to be interspersed with physical work, the input and discussion often occurred within the smaller teams. Often the results of these informal discussions were summarized for the whole group when it met. When it was necessary to discuss the location or design of permanent structures (such as the underground structure's foundation), discussions involved members of several teams and, when possible, the entire group.

Construction

The construction team was involved in three major projects: building a U-shaped straw bale wall (which interlocks with the wall built in 2005), constructing a dome made of reinforced cement and excavating the foundation for a semi-underground structure to be built in 2007. The construction team also worked on building several temporary structures that could form pathways and performance spaces (a tunnel made of bent rebar and covered in fabric, a passageway



The ferro cement dome

framed in willow and covered in cloth and a series of right-angled spaces made of recycled 4'x8' flats).



Walls ready to mortar

Jim Gleason and Tina Therrien worked with the construction team on the straw bale wall and supervised the process. There were 6-8 research assistants working on the straw bale wall at any given time. The steps involved in building the straw bale wall were: laying level foundations, stacking and compressing straw bales, placing a top-plate on top of the bales (to allow a roof to be put on the wall structure in the future) using a "bale-basher" to straighten the sides of the bale wall, tying the bales down with fence wire, stitching plastic mesh to the bales and finally mortaring the wall with cement mortar. The wall was built in approximately eleven work days; however, work was slightly delayed because it was necessary to wait for a clear day to stack the bales. Once the bales were stacked and before the wall was completely mortared, the wall had to be covered with tarps at night and when there was a chance of precipitation. The mortar also had to be regularly misted

with water, in order to allow it to cure properly. The process of building and finishing the wall went very smoothly and was finished two days ahead of schedule.

Both Jim and Tina also advised research assistants on aspects of dome construction such as laying foundations and mixing mortar for the exterior and interior surfaces. An area approximately 30' in diameter was cleared using the backhoe, leveled and covered in gravel. A circular footing was framed and poured. As the foundation was poured, arched pieces of rebar were placed around the perimeter of the and were tied at the top defining the dome shape; shorter pieces of rebar were placed between the arches for additional support. Two doorways and a "skylight" opening in the top of the dome were also framed with rebar. Once the rebar frame was in place, several layers of chicken wire were wired to the frame to strengthen the structure and to provide a surface for the mortar to adhere to. Research assistants set up scaffolding in order to attach the chicken wire to the top of the dome. Finally three layers of mortar were applied to the chicken wire, two on the outside of the dome and one on the inside surface. This process was time consuming because only a few people could work at any given time due to limited space inside the dome. From start to finish, the dome took approximately sixteen work days to build and required a team of 4-8 people, depending on the stage of the process. The dome is



Jerrard attaching wire to dome structure

approximately 20' in diameter and 10' high. It has two arched doorways and a skylight, all of which will be sealed with plywood for the winter.

Landscaping



One of the forest paths

The landscaping team consisted of a core group of research assistants advised by Diana Smith and Barbara Guy-Long. At first the team was made up of approximately 4 people working, generally, together, but as time went on and construction tasks were completed, other participants joined the team; by the end of the building period there were often up to 8 people working on the planting team. One of the team's major tasks was reinforcing the paths that had already been

cut in the woods in previous years. Places

where potential participants in the labyrinth could get off course had to be, in most cases, eliminated, so the landscaping team worked on blocking off most of the possible dead-ends in the forested section. Several areas of the paths had poison ivy growing on or near them; the landscaping team laid cardboard and branches over these areas to prevent people from coming in contact with poison ivy. Early in the process, the team cleared a path through a section of snow-damaged cedars that had been identified as a potentially interesting performance space. Initially it was unclear how this space would fit into a path through the labyrinth; however, during the following weeks the landscaping team developed a series of trails leading into and out of this cedar section. Another task that the team was involved in was the construction of a series of natural structures, such as archways, rock walls, woven cedar walls, and a small hut, that were used to mark out specific areas as performance spaces.

Sculpture

The sculpture team was responsible for two main tasks, first, a series of experiments with mortar and various support surfaces (woven branches, snow fencing) to determine what possibilities for sculptural work existed with the materials available on site and second, the creation of several sculptural pieces for specific parts of the labyrinth. The pieces that were completed include a series of ferro-cement heads and body parts and the shell of a wooden boat (all relating to specific parts of the text). During the



Theseus' boat by Maria Michails

workshop some of the pieces were moved to appropriate places in the labyrinth in order to see how participants could interact with and respond to material objects. In the first week, the sculpture team was made up of 4 people; however, by the end of the process the sculpture team and the planting team had, to an extent, merged as people participating in each group focused on completing the projects (such as individual sculptures and sections of the wooded trails) that they had begun. This was a natural result of the conceptual overlap between the planting and sculpture teams.

Mapping

The mapping team's first task was to develop a scale drawing of the entire site, including permanent and semi-permanent structures and objects (such as the straw bale wall, large trees and the dining tent). The site was divided into 20' x 20' squares that were marked with stakes. Then the mapping team created a 4'x8' map of the site where future structures and paths could be plotted. The mapping team's second major task was to determine where sections of the text might be performed. The mapping team used the script and the scale model to plan a route through the labyrinth and to locate approximately the first half of the text in the performance spaces. At several points during the building process and then multiple times during the final weekend's workshop, participants moved through the labyrinth paying attention to which scenes could be performed in particular spaces. Although the mapping team was able to plot a route through the labyrinth, the route they mapped this summer may not be the final route that participants will take. It was understood by most that it was too early in the process to specifically define any areas as final although as the project progressed, we all began to feel that a shape was beginning to evolve. There were three core members of the mapping team; however, the mapping team was quite involved with the planting and sculpture groups and many members of these three groups worked in all three areas during their time on site.

Documentation

Documentation was done on an on-going basis during the time on site. On the first weekend, Garrick Filewod met with the research assistants who were interested in documentation and discussed some ways of recording information, such as "work-in-progress" still shots of particular locations (the straw bale wall, the dome), candid still shots of both the work process and life on site, short video segments of important moments (such as script readings), taped interviews with participants concerning their experiences, and written responses to the works. The documentation team members worked in other areas of the project and were generally responsible for documenting the experience of working a particular team. Several members of the documentation team had additional responsibilities, such as "work-in-progress" shots, taken a few times a day throughout the process; this

meant that some members of the documentation team left their primary work team in order to maintain consistent documentation procedures. All participants who worked as photographers, videographers or interviewers were required to sign a release and to agree that their work was to be used by the Asterion project for research purposes.

In general, participants were told that their input into all aspects of the project was welcome, even if it concerned an area they were not directly involved with and this input was recorded in several ways. This was particularly apparent during discussions of the text and during the final workshop, when participants were encouraged to provide feedback and ideas; these ideas were discussed and even attempted, and some resulted in changes to the structures being explored, but suggestions have not yet been incorporated into the written text.

Text Work

At the end of the first weekend on site (June 25) participants began reading through the script. These script readings continued for two more evenings (with participants working through the script for about 1 1/2 hours at a time). Murray Schafer joined the group for these readings, facilitating discussion and providing background information on the script. Participants discussed the script as the reading progressed and talked about how various scenes might work in the locations that were being created. Participants were encouraged to select one or more sections of the text to focus on throughout their time on site and during the final workshop (if they were attending it). After the mapping team had reached a preliminary stage of mapping the space and including possible locations for particular scenes in their planning, participants did a walk-through of the space and talked about what scenes might take place in each location. This process helped participants visualize how scenes might appear in particular spaces and provided new material for discussion.



Script readings

Workshops

Initially three public workshops were planned. Two were intended as practical weekends focusing on aspects of straw bale construction and one as a focused exploration of the text using the spaces we had defined. Ultimately we only had the final text workshop; the straw bale construction went much more quickly than planned, so there would have been very little for workshop participants to do. This was just as well, as public interest in these two workshops was low, mainly because the workshops were publicized quite late. Three people joined us for the final

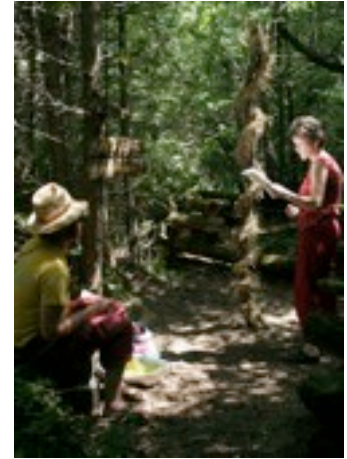
workshop and several of the research assistants decided to stay on after their contracts ended to attend the workshop. The research assistants who were hired for the strike period also participated in the workshop making a significant number of both involved participants and more objective outsiders.

The workshop participants arrived on Friday night and work began early on Saturday morning. Several research assistants took on parts from the script and the rest of the participants walked through the labyrinth. We worked through the first few sections of the script. After the first walk through, we had a discussion about how the neophytes experienced the journey and about issues such as how to create a connection between performers and neophytes and how intense the experience of the first sections of the labyrinth should be for neophytes. The first sections of the text are intended to challenge neophytes to confront their fears by experiencing a series of trials; this preparation allows neophytes to more fully experience the meditative experiences that follow later in the text. In the workshop, we experimented with various ways of staging and reading the text to determine how to generate an emotional and affective experience for neophytes. Much of the follow up discussion concerned participants' responses to the experience and performers' analysis of how they interpreted the text during the workshop.

The process of walk through followed by discussion was repeated throughout the weekend, with the focus switching between parts of the text and with different people taking on different roles and positions (neophyte vs. performer). Murray Schafer joined the group for much of the workshop and contributed his opinion on the experience and helped answer questions about the text.

Infrastructure

The site is not supplied with water or electricity, so part of the planning process involved organizing infrastructure to make living on site comfortable for participants. We rented six portable toilets, which were located near the tent site and the work site. We also rented a 2000L water tank that supplied water for working (mixing mortar and cement, misting curing mortar), cleaning equipment, washing dishes and showering. A water pump, run by power from a generator, helped provide consistent water pressure and to increase flow from the tank. A cold-water shower was attached to the water tank and was set up for participants to use. The water tank had to be refilled several times during the time on site. Two gas-powered generators were used, primarily for running the water pump, the mortar and cement mixers, and corded power tools. We used a deep cycle battery and a power inverter to power and charge electronic equipment (such as laptops, cell phones and cameras). Two solar panels were also used to charge equipment. A



Reading the text in one of the forest clearings

charging station was set up in the nearby barn for charging battery-operated tools; however, we did not need to rely on this power supply as much as in previous years. Cell phones were used for communication and cell phone reception on site was all right: some participants, particularly those who used Rogers as a provider, had fairly good service; however, others complained about dropped calls and poor reception.

Two large tents were set up, one for tool storage and a shaded work area and the other for a kitchen and social area. The kitchen tent had two propane barbecues and a number of propane burners. Bottled drinking water (supplied by Rocky Ridge) was stored in the kitchen tent and was available for participants at all times. Several large coolers provided refrigeration; it was necessary to buy ice almost daily and to buy groceries daily because of limited storage and refrigeration space. Aside from Danny Wild, the kitchen supervisor, two research assistants were assigned to help in the kitchen. Meals were eaten communally and clean up was shared by participants. A dishwashing station was set up near the water tank. The kitchen was able to accommodate dietary restrictions and vegetarian lifestyles. Many participants commented on the high quality and variety of food provided; this seemed to help with keeping morale high among participants. We also set up two smaller tents, one for storage (for items like backpacks and musical instruments) and one as an office, with a table, chairs, laptop, printer, and battery supply.

Participants brought their own tents and camped on site. After work finished each day, people entertained themselves by playing musical instruments, playing Frisbee, flying kites, swimming and going hiking at nearby sites. Evenings were also often spent discussing the work and the script. Research assistants had one day off per week.

Plans for next year

1. We plan to have at least one social gathering with participants from summer 2006. We hope to have some of the participants from 2006 return to work on the project in 2007; so social events will help maintain cohesion among these participants. This will also serve as an opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences and to share any final observations on the process.
2. We plan to spend fall 2006 and winter 2007 developing contacts with potential sponsors for the project. We are looking for cash and in-kind donations to help offset the cost of materials and infrastructure during the on-site period. We are also exploring the possibility of forming long-term partnerships with private sponsors and corporations. One option we are considering would involve sponsors partnering with artists to develop particular rooms or performance spaces in the final stages of the project.

3. In 2007, we plan to organize the on-site time somewhat differently than in 2006. After an initial site set-up period, we will have a construction team on site to build a roof and tower on top of the straw bale walls. We plan for the construction period to last approximately two weeks. Following this, we will invite a group of participants to the site for one week to take part in an intensive text workshop. This group would be composed of interdisciplinary artists and students, from disciplines such as theatre, visual art, design, music and literature.

Conclusion

More analysis is needed and a determination of the makeup of the team for next year. This would be based on:

1. Interest in returning
2. Tasks planned and skills required
3. Budget

This can wait until all the information is in.

Jerrard Smith/Heather Davis 2006