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Psychological Liminality in Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*

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Anthony Neilson is a Scottish dramatist of growing international significance, with plays, such as *Realism* (2006) and its companion piece *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2003: hereafter abridged to *Dissocia*), being performed by companies from the National Theatre of Scotland to the Sydney Theatre Company. When researching *Dissocia* it was unexpected to learn the relative paucity of current critical material on the play. There is some academic discourse,¹ but significantly less than what could be reasonably anticipated, especially given the popularity and longevity of the production. The current criticism of *Dissocia* is invaluable, but of the scholarly writing that does occur, none actually engages with sustained close textual analysis of the play and its thematic concerns. This article will shift the discussion beyond the work already available and is concerned with demonstrating that Neilson's work warrants more critical consideration as it has much to offer the field of drama, particularly in its scope to enhance dialogues on liminality; because, as David Edgar reports, 'drama is about liminal zones' (Edgar 2009, p.202). It should also be noted that part of the analysis of *Dissocia* will consist of original transcript evidence from an interview that was conducted between Neilson and myself in May 2012.

At this juncture it is important to define what the term 'liminal' will be taken to encompass in this work. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'liminal' pertains to 'a transitional or initial stage of a process ...[m]arginal...[o]ccupying position on, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold' (Oxford 1993, p. 1591). For this essay, the words 'transitional', 'marginal', 'boundary' and 'threshold' will be key. Neilson argues that 'theatre exists in this liminal zone, this other sort of place', and describes how *Dissocia* is concerned with the 'tension between the landscape of the soul and the tension between the real physical world we have to live in' (Neilson 2012). Neilson's argument and thematic synopsis display his fascination with 'the

internal' and 'the external', and the fact that he believes 'we cannot live fully in either one of these places' (Neilson 2012) positions the action of his play, in what Victor Turner terms, 'a limin, or threshold... a no-man's land betwixt and between' (Turner 1990, p. 11).

Adrienne Scullion notes that Scottish theatre 'deploys a catalogue of relevant metaphors and mutable edges and liminal terrains, the space between, as well as the "here" and the "there"' (Scullion 2007, p. 74). This is a particularly apt observation to describe Neilson's *Dissocia*, as, in the words of Aleks Sierz, 'his metaphor for psychosis is the idea of another world, called Dissocia, with its own borders, rituals and mores' (Sierz 2011, p. 199). Trish Reid asserts that Neilson's *Dissocia* 'gives significant weight to elements of performance other than written text' (Reid 2007, p. 489), and notes how Neilson is 'consistently concerned with characters that occupy the margins, whether between sanity and insanity, or acceptance and exclusion'. (Reid 2011, p. 197) In *Dissocia*, Neilson pursues this argument by presenting liminal terrain that does not exist even conceptually as a realist space; rather it exists on the threshold between the material world and a fantasy realm between 'sanity and insanity'. This article will focus on the methods of construction of this liminal landscape and the components used in order to do so.

To give a brief synopsis of the play, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* is a tragicomic escapade into the underworld of mental malady. Neilson's principal protagonist, Lisa Montgomery Jones, is a woman afflicted with a serious dissociative complaint, and the play is a depiction of her delight in the highs and her suffering of the lows of her disorder. Lisa stops taking her anti-psychotic medication, and as a result embarks on an imaginative journey to the self-fabricated land of Dissocia – a place which only exists within her own mind and is governed by its very own bizarre logic and exuberant unpredictability – in search of a lost hour that has tipped the balance of her life. In the first half of the play, Lisa's excursion into this vibrant, but simultaneously terrifying, realm is littered with chance meetings between herself and a cavalcade of weird and fantastical characters. These dramatis personae include a Hare Krishna-like Oathtaker, and the eponymously monikered Laughter and Ticket,

who are subsequently revealed to be Mungarees; Musketeer-like royal guards. But Lisa cannot escape the feeling that all is not as it should be. In the much shorter second half, everything shifts and the radical polarity of the piece is evident. Lisa lies hospitalised in a muted and stark psychiatric unit, where she is heavily sedated.

To briefly map out the development of the argument, the first construction method which will be examined is intertextual allusion to other well-known fantasy realms, with the motif of children adventuring in these worlds being particularly relevant in the analysis. This article examines semiotic signposts; linguistic, plot and character parallels; means of entry and transportational similarities in order to facilitate the understanding of the connection between the liminal domains. In *Dissocia* corporeality interacts with the fantastical, creating a whole new liminal zone, and key to understanding these properties are the stage directions in the play; therefore they will be included in much of the analysis of liminality in this article. The intention is to present examples of interludes and then decipher what has occurred in the material world of the play in order to develop a fuller understanding of how Neilson's theatrical representations create liminal terrain.

Furthermore, *Dissocia* exhibits some of the properties of dreams, and dreams are liminal terrain which, as Matthew DeVoll maintains, 'possess some undefined middle-ground between the spiritual self and the external world of physical nature' (DeVoll 2004, p. 76). Therefore, the argument will present the analogy of Lisa in a waking dream in order to highlight the liminal properties of Neilson's dreamscape; with particular attention being paid to how, as in dreams, events are shaped by subconscious association. Like most other fantasy realms and fairy tales, *Dissocia* has a darker side and can be dangerous terrain to navigate. This article will examine how an event in the real world is depicted in the liminal realm, and how its horror is translated. Sound – which is rarely given the importance in the analysis of performance that it deserves – is of significance in understanding the attributes of *Dissocia*. The different manners will be illustrated - in to, out of, and within – in

which it interacts with Neilson's liminal world, and what each type of interaction signifies or implies. Songs are also significant indicators of meaning in the play. Therefore, their presence and properties will be analysed in order to plot the trajectory of their connection to this liminal landscape. The article will also demonstrate how the world of *Dissocia* in the play is deconstructed and explore the ramifications of exposure to liminality. Even after *Dissocia* is banished Neilson still has liminal terrain in his play. This new type of liminal terrain will be analysed in order to accentuate the dual nature of liminality Neilson employs and how both liminal zones are inextricably linked.

In the course of our interview Neilson stated that:

I've never been personally or professionally hung up on place, and I've never been very external. I've always been much more interested in the internal...and felt that the uncharted territory was largely inside,...and certainly untapped in terms of narrative structure. So I don't know that the sense of place is massively important. (Neilson May 2012)

By his own admission, Neilson is not 'professionally hung up on place', and this is certainly the case in terms of physical location. But it could be argued that Neilson is being too modest, that on some level 'place is massively important' as a psychological location in his work because the vast majority of his plays focus on exploring the internal life of the mind. In *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, Neilson explores his attraction to the liminality of an individual's personality by inadvertently being a proponent of Richard Cody's argument that 'landscape traditionally evokes less of a place than a state of mind' (Cody 1969, p. 40). This landscape of the mind – or a mindscape if you will – is investigated through his principal protagonist Lisa who, to borrow a phrase from Carl Macdougall, has 'a mind on the edge of collapse, a mind that uses fantasy as a comfort, a relief from misery' (Macdougall 2004, p.82). Often in theatre, as Elinor Fuchs notes, 'figures float off into fantasies in which they merge with landscapes of the imagination' (Fuchs 2002, p. 35); in Neilson's play this

hypothesis takes the form of Lisa's excursion into her internal liminal mindscape *Dissocia*.

Rosie Millard describes *Dissocia* as 'a dream-world that...Neilson has dramatically tweaked to provide a fabulously surreal and fast-changing landscape' (Millard 2007, p. 44). This 'dream-world' is 'created associatively, it is joined up, it is linked' (Neilson May 2012), and has partly been constructed by intertextually alluding to other imaginary worlds from film and literature and signposting their incorporation in the spoken and written text as well as visually in the performance. There is a definite subtext of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Roald Dahl's *The Great Glass Elevator* (1973), Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865); because like *Dissocia*, *Wonderland* has 'a very linear open sort of world that she just wanders in... there's no real plot and it's very dreamlike' (Neilson May 2012).

In *The Wizard of Oz*, it is not implausible to define Dorothy's excursion as a subconscious attempt to reinstitute a semblance of harmony to her life. This psychological undercurrent is also present in *Dissocia*, as can be gleaned when Lisa is informed that 'if you re-assimilate the hour, balance will be restored to your life' (Act 1, p.11), by her simulacrum of the psychologist Sigmund Freud – as will be discussed below – and she launches into a journey into her own liminal landscape. Linguistic parallels to *The Wizard of Oz* are also pronounced in the following exchange where Lisa is told how to get to the destination where she can complete her quest:

Lisa: You haven't told me how to get there...

Guard 1: Where?

Lisa: Lost Property.

Guard 1: Oh right, yes. How does she get there?

Guard 2: How -? Oh, yes, well – follow the sun?

Guard 1: That's right. Just follow the sun and you'll get there.

(Act 1, p. 31).

This exchange is reminiscent of events in *Oz* when Dorothy is told to ‘follow the yellow brick road’ as the means to reach the Emerald City. With another echo of *Oz* – ‘There’s no place like home there’s no place like home there’s no place like home’ – apparent when events begin to spin out of control, and Lisa, who ‘is wearing a party dress of some sort...indirectly suggesting the iconography of Dorothy’s dress’ (Neilson 2004, p. 2), ‘*lies down in the foetal position, her ears covered*’ wailing ‘I want to go home I want to go home I want to go home’ (Act 1, p. 45).

Reid recounts how Lisa ‘spends the first half of the play in this extraordinarily vivid world encountering strange and wondrous characters’ (Reid 2011, p. 197). During this jaunt allusions to Narnia are also evident when the character of Goat is happened upon. Alex Engebretson observes that ‘humans/animals...blend together in liminal space’ (Engebretson 2011, p. 13) in what is termed anthropomorphism. This is a device that Neilson employs to connect his liminal realm with Lewis’ liminal landscape, because not only can Goat talk, just as the animals in Narnia can, but the very fact that he is a goat – played by an actor and therefore displaying anthropomorphic qualities – parallels the faun Mr. Tumnus from *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, who is ‘from the waist upwards shaped like a man, but his legs were shaped like a goat’s and instead of feet he had goat’s hoofs’ (Lewis, 1950, p.8). Mr. Tumnus also attempts to betray the heroine Lucy to the villain of the book, the White Witch; he is ‘the sort of faun to meet a poor child in the wood, one who had never done’ him ‘any harm, and pretend to be friendly...all for the sake of lulling’ them ‘asleep and then handing over to the White Witch’ (Lewis, 1950, p.17-18). This is just like the Goat in *Dissocia*, who tries to betray the heroine Lisa to the villain of the play, the Black Dog King. A fact we see in the following excerpt:

Suddenly, the Goat ensnares her with the rope.

Goat: I’ve found her, Master! She’s here! The girl that seeks the hour!

Lisa: What are you doing? Let me go! You’re hurting me!...

Goat: I’ve got no choice, don’t you see? He’ll have to let me join him now.

Lisa: Who will? Join who?

Goat: The Master! He who will bring calamity to Dissocia! The
Destroyer!

The Black Dog King! (Act 1, pp. 39-40).

Like Dissocia, Narnia can also be accessed by a train system – as will be discussed below –when in *Prince Caspian*, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are teleported into Narnia while waiting for a train:

It was an empty, sleepy, country station and there was hardly any one on the platform except themselves... Next moment the luggage, the seat, the platform, and the station had completely vanished. The four children holding hands and panting found themselves standing in a woody place..."Oh Peter...Do you think we can possibly have come back to Narnia?" (Lewis 1951, pp. 2-4).

The Great Glass Elevator's influence is discernible when upon telephoning the 'Dissocian Embassy...we hear an automated voice' informing Lisa that 'Your flat is now an elevator. To descend to Dissocia, please press 9' (Act 1, pp. 11-12). And like Dahl's 'elevator', Neilson's can also move sideways:

Suddenly (at least) four people have all cramped around her, as if in a small elevator. They look like fairly regular commuters...

Automated Voice: Door closing. Going down.

The elevator begins its descent (Although curiously it sounds like an Underground train)...

Automated Voice: Going sideways...

Passenger 4 – who has been reading a paper – turns to face sideways. Once again the other passengers follow. (Act 1, pp. 12-13)

It is because of the combined impact of the staging implications of the stage directions, ‘*people...look like fairly regular commuters...it sounds like an underground train*’, the fact that the Passengers change the direction they are facing mirrors how passengers behave when the tube stops at a station, and the Automated Voice’s line ‘Going sideways’, that we know the ‘elevator’ moves horizontally. This fact would have been even more conspicuous to an audience when the visual and audio semiotics were observed in a performance, thus verifying J. Styan’s contention that ‘words cannot fully communicate the fullness of theatre’ (Styan 1988, p. 108). That the ‘elevator’ is actually a tube train is a hint to the audience, and reader, that they are witnessing a dual plane of existence: ‘a kind of monologue where the place is her...a setting which is in effect Lisa’ (Neilson May 2012), and the everyday actualities of the real world splice with the solipsistic mindscape of *Dissocia*.

In *Dissocia*, Neilson felt that it was important to ‘have a sort of real world analogue for what was going on with Lisa’ (Neilson May 2012). He achieves this objective by demonstrating, that it is ‘possible to be geographically located and belong to one place but simultaneously to imagine and identify with social procedures in other space/time configurations’ (Nicholson 2005, p.45). In analysing Neilson’s fascination with the hybridity of locations – physical and imaginative – it is important to acknowledge Reid’s deduction that ‘in developing strategies that “theatrically represent the internal landscape”² of his protagonists...a useful terrain onto which to map his work might be offered by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his influential study *Postdramatic Theatre*’ (Reid 2007, p. 493). According to Lehman, ‘*Postdramatic Theatre* includes conceptions that think of theatre...as a construction that deforms reality’ and where ‘stage directions often come to resemble the structure of dreams’ (Lehman 2006, p. 62; p. 82). Reid’s deduction is particularly astute because Neilson himself believes that ‘this weird space of theatre is a very dreamlike space...and I

think if you were to directly translate a dream environment you would end up with something quite theatrical' (Neilson May 2012).

The splicing of the real world with Lisa's mindscape is one of the principal strategies that Neilson employs to create his sense of a liminal place in *Dissocia*. Therefore, because the 'basic story is of someone who has stopped taking their medication, who was out on a bender, and just wandering around' (Neilson May 2012), it should prove a fruitful to explore some of the various locations in *Dissocia* and the events that transpire there in order to plot where it is taking place in reality and what is likely to actually be occurring and thus explore *Dissocia*'s liminality.

We enter this dream environment where 'stage directions come to resemble the structure of dreams' from the play's inception. DeVoll asserts that 'the dreaming mind usurps the sovereignty of Reason, presenting a private theatre of the absurd' (DeVoll 2004, p. 72). DeVoll's assertion is particularly pertinent in the following vignettes where Lisa seems to be in a waking-dream. As she tunes her guitar, her

face remains blank, her eyes distant.

Higher and higher the note, the string growing ever more taut...

Up and up and up until...the string snaps...someone rattles her letterbox (Act 1, p. 5).

At this juncture the audio semiotics, represented by the increase in the guitar's pitch, suggests that the final residue of Lisa's anti-psychotic medication is wearing off, and as '*the string snaps*', Lisa '*snaps*' out of reality, and into her 'internal landscape.' '*The rattling of the letterbox, however, is live*' (Act 1, p. 5), and this fact signals a hybridity of locations as we hear '*from offstage*' (p. 5) the character of Victor announcing 'I know you're there Miss Jones. I know you can hear me. It is vital that I speak to you'. (p. 5) In effect, what we have is Lisa imagining that the person at the door is Victor; who when he enters '*bears more than a passing resemblance to how we imagine Sigmund Freud: goatee beard, long coat, gloves, walking stick, hat,*

pocket watch' (Act 1, p. 6). This heralds the fact that we have entered a 'dream environment' or a threshold between waking and sleeping, because Freud is synonymous with the analysis of dreams.³

As has already been explored, the 'elevator' is actually the Tube. Upon disembarking the 'elevator' Lisa has arrived in Dissocia, which is described as follows:

By the ambient sound, the blinking lights and the airship that floats in the distance, it would seem that we are in some kind of airport arrivals lounge (Act 1, p. 13).

Due to the fact that '*Lisa is wandering around aimlessly*', she attracts the attention of '*Two uniformed Guards who are 'a mass of tics and twitches, bug-eyed and sweating with general paranoia*', as they have the following discussion:

Guard 1: But does it cover my arse? Look –

Guard 2: Well reasonably. I mean – most of it, yeah –

Guard 1: It only comes halfway down! You can see – there's such a steep drop from my arse to my legs – I've such a fucking fat arse!...

Guard 2: It looks fine. I'm telling you! I'd kill for an arse like that: look at mine! (Act 1, p. 15).

The Guards then apprehensively apprehend Lisa, initially asking:

Guard 2: Um – hello – can we help you?

'Can we help you'! That's so fucking lame!...

Guard 1: She thinks we're a right pair of fucking twats!

(Act 1, p. 15)

They then progress to other questions such as:

Guard 1: - bringing anything into the country that we wouldn't mind

you bringing in?...

Has anybody other than yourself worn that dress today?...

Guard 2: ...have you left your hair unattended for any period of time or allowed anyone else to touch or stroke it recently?

(Act 1, p. 16; p. 20).

Hadfield asserts that often in drama ‘ideas are dressed up in human form, and qualities of character are represented by people possessing those qualities’ (1972, p. 126). Neilson pushes the boundaries of this idea in the following excerpt where the nature of the Guards is revealed:

Lisa: Oh dear. That must be awful for you.

Guard 1: Well, yes; but that’s what we do.

Guard 2: Such is the lot...of an insecurity guard.

Pause.

Lisa: An *insecurity* guard?

Guard 2: Yes?

Lisa: Don’t you mean a security guard?

The Guards look at each other.

Guard 2: What would be the point of that?

Guard 1: No, I mean, if it’s secure –

Guard 2: - why would you have to guard it?! (Act 1, p. 17).

In this whole episode what the audience is experiencing is Lisa’s cognitive translation of events and locations. And what is absolutely vital to acknowledge is it is all created associatively. What actually seems to have gone on is that Lisa phones a call centre from her flat and adapts the mundane options into directions to Dissocia. She then gets on the Tube to an airport, because Lisa associates an airport with being a place where you enter a country. Edgar points out that ‘the setting may lead us to expect certain activities’ (Edgar 2009, p. 126). Therefore, in light of this idea it seems reasonable to assume that while ‘*Lisa is wandering around aimlessly*’ at the airport,

she sees a couple of Security Guards. It is not being suggested that Lisa actually interacts with the Security Guards at the airport, and has a version of the conversation presented above, because in any actual interaction it would have been obvious that Lisa is unwell and in all likelihood would have been detained. The proposition is that she is imagining having it. Then by a process of association the Security Guards become Insecurity Guards with all the requisite connotations this entails, such as ‘I’ve such a fucking fat arse!’ and ‘she thinks we’re a right pair of fucking twats!’ And if we reapply Edgar’s assertion that in a specific location we can ‘expect certain activities’, we have the Dissocian version of the standard query from Security Guards at airports: ‘have you left your luggage unattended or has anyone else had access to it?’ morphing into ‘have you left your hair unattended for any period of time or allowed anyone else to touch or stroke it recently?’ This strategy of association, or what Neilson describes as ‘the real world analogue’, when interacting in the various locales in the play, is one which Neilson repeats throughout the first act, as he comically fuses landscape with mindscape and creates a whole new liminal zone.

But Dissocia is not just a fairy tale world of jolly japery with comedy characters where ‘ideas are dressed up in human form’ (Hadfield 1972, p. 126). The fact that, as John Bull notes, ‘there is a dark side to Dissocia is important’ (Bull 2011, p. 356). Neilson relates how Lisa ‘generally just gets carried away and sort of makes a mess...and worries people and goes running off...out there on the street putting herself into positions of danger’ (Neilson May 2012). One of these ‘positions of danger’, which shows the ‘dark side of Dissocia’, is as follows:

Goat: ...I’ll be the greatest scapegoat that ever lived!

He forces Lisa to the ground and dances round her, in glee...

The sound of passing cars, as if we’re on a motorway lay-by.

The Goat has become distracted by the sight of Lisa’s bottom as she struggles.

He looks around, furtively. Decisively, he turns her over.

Lisa: What are you doing?

With one final glance behind him, the Goat hitches up her dress.

Goat: Just be quiet and you might enjoy yourself!

He starts to undo his trousers.

Lisa: Oh my god, what are you doing?!

The traffic is deafening now. The Goat grunts as he tries to enter her.

Lisa lets out a shrill and chilling scream... (Act 1, pp. 40-1).

Martin Esslin intimates that theatre ‘should be able to translate ideas and psychological realities into simple and concrete images’ (Esslin 2001, p. 101). This tableau embodies Esslin’s intimation. Through the ‘concrete image’ of the rapacious malevolence of this anthropomorphic goat, the idea that someone is trying to rape Lisa near a busy road is translated. Jennifer Bussey intimates that ‘anthropomorphism encourages the reader to broaden his or her view of character because the character could represent anyone or anything’ (Bussey 2002, p. 88). What Goat represents is how two turns of phrase *capriciously* associated are made flesh when exposed to liminality; these phrases are when ‘scapegoat’ – evidenced by Goat exclaiming that ‘I’ll be the greatest scapegoat that ever lived’ - is associatively alloyed with ‘randy as a goat’. That Lisa is actually about to be raped can be discerned from the stage directions which state ‘*The sound of passing cars, as if we are on a motorway lay-by*’ and ‘*the traffic is deafening now*’. The fact that we have audio intrusion from the real world at this moment strongly implies that the attempt at rape is actually occurring. This demonstrates how in *Dissocia* ‘sounds are massively important in giving a sense of place’ (Neilson May 2012), as interaction between the physical world and the imaginary world is discernible through this audio intrusion. In effect, the liminal properties of *Dissocia* are accentuated and the ‘hybridity of location’ is maintained.

Lisa is saved from being assaulted by the timely intervention of the character of Jane ‘from the Community Crime Initiative’ who informs her that ‘I’m here to be beaten and anally raped for you’ (Act 1, p. 42). As this event transpires:

Helplessly, Lisa watches the offstage action: there is the sound of animal grunting, Jane screaming, the sound of blows... the awful sounds build and build.

(Note: in the original production, the live offstage sounds were Eventually swamped by a treated recording of a violent domestic argument) (Act 1, Scene 1, p. 45).

It seems that when sound from the real world impinges on Dissocia, it is because nasty events trigger its intrusion. At these points Lisa is losing control of her liminal mindscape, as all her concentration has to be spent blocking out what is happening in reality. As a result she is left with inadequate mental resources to fully maintain her imaginative surroundings, with the upshot being an inundation of sounds from reality. This buttresses the idea of two parallel universes co-existing in conjunction, in addition to showing how fine the line is between them and the fragility of their connection.

But sounds are also ‘massively important in giving a sense of place’, because not only do they impinge on Dissocia from reality, they also impinge on reality from Dissocia. In the following speech and stage directions we can witness this phenomenon:

Pause. She has an idea: she takes out her mobile phone and dials a number. To her surprise it works. (Here we might hear an effect similar to that outlined on page 10).

Lisa: Vince, it’s me. Listen -...my flat turned into an elevator and I’ve gone to this place called Dissocia. It’s quite an odd place but the people are nice and the sky is really colourful and hopefully I’ll be back soon with the balance fully restored so don’t worry about me. Give me a ring when you get this.

Bye.

She puts the phone away. Pause.

I suppose that sounds a bit weird (Act 1, pp. 32-3).

The effect '*outlined on page 10*' is as follows ': *'over the next speech...A stage mike is used to add a hint of reverb to her voice. Strange, discordant sounds can be heard over the soundtrack*'. When both sets of stage directions are combined with Lisa's phone call, Neilson illustrates that communication between her internal mindscape and external reality is a 'two way street'. The fact that there is '*a hint of reverb to her voice*' and '*discordant sounds can be heard*' overlaying the monologue, is a vehicle for facilitating the idea that things become distorted in transit between the dual planes of existence, as well as accentuating the morphic properties of Dissocia.

As a side note it may be worth mentioning Neilson's pun – whether this is deliberate or accidental is open to debate – at the end of this section: 'I suppose that sounds a bit weird'. By the mere insertion of an apostrophe into the line the meaning is altered 'I suppose that sound's a bit weird', but phonetically the line remains the same. This idea works on two levels, because we have a double meaning in the line; Lisa's phone call to Vince 'sounds a bit weird' due to its content of claiming to be in a parallel universe, as well as how it sounds due to the audio effects laid over it, and that in the play as a whole 'sound's a bit weird'. We also have a dual temporal allusion that in the play sound has been and will be 'a bit weird'. The double meaning in the line and its temporal duality echo the thematic concern of the dual nature of liminal zones in the play.

Thus far, this article has analysed sound as a conduit into and out of Dissocia. Therefore, it is also worth discussing how 'sound's a bit weird' within Dissocia. Daniel Gerould describes how 'magical poetic texture consists of a symphony of shapes, colours and sounds' (Gerould 2002, p. 315). Gerould's description is

particularly accurate when pertaining to the following section of the play, where Lisa associatively creates an audio representation of a turn of phrase and runs with it into a fully-fledged musical number. We see and hear ‘puns and the type of humour which is very associative...that moves the way the mind moves’ (Neilson, May 2012):

Lisa: I suppose that sounds a bit weird...I mean what’s an hour?

She makes a gesture as she says this:

An hour is just a sixty-second cycle –

She stops. A musical phrase has played under this.

Pause. She repeats the action:

An hour is –

The musical phrase occurs again. It seems to be connected to the gesture. She makes the gesture on its own and, again the musical phrase. Obviously this is a ‘musical field’. She giggles...

Sweeping her arms up in a gentler motion, it’s as if she lifts the music from the ground like flowers.

She sings ‘What’s an Hour’:

An hour is a sixty-second cycle
Dictated by the journey round the Sun
It’s frequently divided into quarters
Like the hash we used to buy from Davy Dunn.
An hour is a twenty fourth of daytime
If life’s a bitch, an hour is the flea
An hour doesn’t mean
So very much in itself
But it’s my hour

And it means a lot
To me...(Act 1, pp. 33-4).

In this excerpt; by '*Sweeping her arms up in a gentler motion*' Lisa's 'symphony of shapes' results in the '*musical field*' producing a 'symphony of sound'. In essence, a turn of phrase blends gesticulation with sounds into a choreographic score, where 'humour which moves the way the mind moves' is lyrically represented through the connection between 'quarters' and 'the hash we used to buy from Davy Dunn'; and we glimpse how, in Dissocia 'place is an image, a construct of the mind and of feeling' (Muir 1999, p. 115).

Peter Brown maintains that 'places work by association with a particular idea' (Brown and Irwin 2008, p. 21). And as we have already seen, Neilson readily employs this concept to present the properties of his liminal world of Dissocia, as Lisa haphazardly builds an improvised mindscape which changes from moment to moment. In the following excerpt, there is another type of audio linkage which demonstrates Brown's concept in action:

Oathtaker: And now for the ceremonial song!

They all launch into the song 'Dissocia'.

All: Welcome to Dissocia

We're so pleased to meet both of ya

We already feel close to ya

Dissocia, Dissocia!...

And now you are our friend you will

Defend you to the end remember

No one in the world above will

Love you like the people of

This wonderful new world...

Lisa ends up on one of the Guard's shoulders as cannons blast streamers all over her, and the Dissocians arrayed around her Broadway-style (Act 1, p. 27).

At this point in the play Lisa fuses two radically different types of songs associated with two disparate locations in reality: a nation state and the theatre. The 'ceremonial song' can easily be construed as the Dissocian national anthem and, as would have been experienced by the audience, and also seen in the stage directions, the song is performed '*Broadway-style*'. Without exposure to this number as a member of the audience, it is difficult to imagine exactly what would have transpired, but perhaps an appropriate comparison would be *God Save the Queen* being performed by the cast of the Andrew Lloyd Webber show *Cats*. Thus, we have another example of the multifarious representations of sound Neilson utilises in order to add texture and construct his liminal terrain.

Shortly after arriving in Dissocia, Lisa is informed that 'Well basically- we have a Queen...but she's missing' (Act, p. 21), and that only 'Divine Queen Sarah...of the house of Tonin' (Act, p. 25) can protect Dissocia 'from the Black Dog King' (Act 1, p. 29). 'Sarah...Tonin' is Neilson's little nod to the drug serotonin which is used for the treatment of various disorders, including anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders and schizophrenia. Winston Churchill periodically suffered from bouts of crushing depression and his nickname for these interludes was 'Black Dog'. That only the 'missing...Sarah...Tonin' can protect 'from the Black Dog' is another indication of the allusive manner in which this liminal world is evoked by Lisa's unbalanced subconscious. Neilson notes that:

A trope of fairy tale is that the kid arrives and finds out that they're actually the queen or the princess...which is an interesting idea because it's related to the idea that you're the organising personality, you are the umbrella personality of in fact this fantasy world (Neilson May 2012).

In light of this idea, Neilson casts Lisa as the ‘organising...umbrella personality’ of Dissocia; a fact that we find out near the end of the first act when Britney announces, ‘Queen Sarah. You have returned to save us all’ (Act, p. 70). But as Bull points out Dissocia ‘is a world that is falling apart’ (Bull, 2011, p. 356), because, figuratively, ‘Sarah...Tonin’/serotonin cannot protect from the ‘Black Dog King’/depression; a fact theatrically demonstrated at the conclusion of the first act:

*In the distance, the sound of the Black Dog’s approaching
army and their familiar chant:*

All: Rivers of blood will drown the land!

Bones will twist inside the hand!

Children will boil in mothers’ wombs!

Turning on lights will darken rooms!

And heavy skies will team with flocks

Of tiny birds with human cocks!...

*The sound is deafening now – the sound of battle –
which soon becomes
the sound of death, as the Dissocians are slain by the
Black Dog’s army.*

Lisa watches helplessly, in fear and sorrow.

*The sound of the battle finally ceases, and a shadowy figure
Emerges from the carnage...the Black Dog King steps into
the light and Lisa – sees his face for the first time.*

*It is a face she knows only too well. She shakes her head in
horror and disbelief.*

Lisa: Oh my God – it’s you!

*For a moment the lightning suggests we are back at Lisa’s
flat. Vince: reaches out – his hands touch her shoulders.*

Blackness (Act 1, pp. 72-3).

Waldo Emerson postulates that ‘in dreams...we create the persons of the drama; we give them appropriate figures, faces costume...moreover they speak after their own characters not ours’ (Emerson cited in DeVoll 2004, p. 83). As has already been intimated, Lisa’s excursion into Dissocia could definitely be described as a ‘waking-dream’, thus Emerson’s postulation is particularly valid to events at this juncture. In Lisa’s mindscape, the ‘Black Dog King’ has the ‘face and costume’ of her boyfriend Vince. The person who, ‘speak(s) after (his) own character’ not Lisa’s because, in effect, he’s been hunting her down in Dissocia and in reality, ever since she left him the bizarre message on his mobile phone, and finally catches up with her in the liminal and the real world – as ‘*the lighting suggests we are back in her flat*’ – and terminates her ‘waking-dream’. Thus we see that too much exposure or over indulgence in the liminal world that is Dissocia, results in consequences for Lisa when Vince forces her to vacate her mindscape.

Gerould describes how, often in liminal terrain, ‘reality splits apart revealing the world beyond’ (Gerould 2002, p. 311). This is an accurate assessment of events in the first act, but in the second act Neilson subverts this notion because here ‘the world beyond...splits apart...revealing...reality’. David Lane argues that ‘the most effective dramas are often the ones most adept at creating hybridised forms by bringing styles together’ (Lane 2010, p. 51). Lane’s notion is one which Neilson pursues in the second act, which Sierz describes as ‘a complete contrast: arctic, sterile and depressed in feeling’ (Sierz 2011, p. 198), and Reid ‘as colourless and static as Dissocia is colourful and frenetic’ (Reid 2007, p.49). John Brown asserts that ‘short episodes are used to provide a sudden change of viewpoint...or an escalation in the passage of time’ (Brown 2001, p. 146). Brown’s assertion is a valid description of Act Two of *Dissocia*, where we have 16 ‘short episodes’ – scenes occurring over only 15 pages of text, which directly contrasts Act One as it has only one scene covering 69 pages – indicating the ‘sudden change of viewpoint’ that Lisa is in ‘*a room in a psychiatric hospital*’ (Act 2, p. 75). Neilson describes his second act as having a ‘horrible structure...it’s that lights up, lights down, lights up, lights down thing, like television scenes...but the gaps between it become interesting for people’ (Neilson May 2012). These ‘gaps’ between scenes are liminal terrain which indicate ‘an escalation in the passage of time’ for Lisa, and a ‘change of viewpoint’ as the legacy of her excursion

into the liminal world of Dissocia – mental illness – seems to recede. This fact can be ascertained by comparing the stage directions in the following three scenes:

Lisa puts her Walkman on.

She listens.

The tinny music, which we might just be able to recognise from the flying car sequence in Act One.

She nods her head.

Lights down...

The sound of Lisa singing raucously.

Lights up.

Lisa is dancing manically around the room, on the bed, Everywhere, Walkman in hand...

Nurse 3 restrains her, with as little contact as possible, and Manages to get the Walkman. She wraps the headphone cable around it...

Like a petulant child Lisa continues to dance and sing, but soon she is tired out, and she crumples to the floor in tears.

Lights down...

Lights up.

Lisa looks down at the Walkman in her hand.

She puts the headphones on and presses play.

The same tinny music.

But this time there is no movement.

She just listens.

Lights down (Act 2, Scenes 5, 6 and 12, pp. 78-83).

Helen Nicholson argues that ‘when people cross to new territories they will leave something of their old selves behind as they begin to identify with different positions and perspectives’ (Nicholson 2005, p. 45). This argument is relevant to Lisa

because she ‘leaves something of’ her ‘old self behind’ when she crosses from Dissocia to reality. That something is her mania: a fact evident in her two contrasting reactions to the ‘*music...from the flying car sequence in Act One*’.

When Lisa leaves her liminal landscape she also begins ‘to identify with different positions and perspectives’, as we see in the following exchange when Vince comes to visit her:

Lisa: I just want to say that I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all the trouble I cause everyone. I don’t mean to...

Vince: ...you say you don’t mean to. But you know what happens when you come off your medication. This happens. Sooner or later you end up here.

Lisa: I know.

Vince: Yeah, but it’s not *enough* to say that you know... I thought you wanted to get better.

Lisa: I do want to get better... Vince – I’m really going to try.
(Act 2, Scene 15, p.87).

On one level this identification proves the veracity of Richard Muir’s contention that ‘identity can be changed through place over time’ (Muir 1999, p. 273), and that ‘journeying into other worlds changes the people who make them’ (Macdougall 2004, p. 77), because reality has ‘restored the balance’ (Act 1, p. 12) to Lisa’s life. But on another level, these assertions hold no water when applied to Lisa, due to the fact that, even after all the medication she has consumed and the therapy she has undergone, Lisa is still unchanged; as we see in the final scene of the play:

Night. Lisa is asleep. She looks at peace. In her arms she holds a small polar bear.

We hear music at last.

Coloured lights play over her face, swirling around her head.

Dissocia still exists, caught within her head.

There is little doubt that she will return to her kingdom.

Lights down.

End (Act 2, Scene 16, p.89).

Hadfield contends that ‘a dream may have a profound effect on the dreamer and may be of great therapeutic value’ (1972, p. 123). On one level this is the case for Lisa as she ‘*looks at peace*’ when she is sleeping, but on another level nothing could be further from the truth, as there has been no ‘therapeutic value’ whatsoever because ‘*Dissocia still exists, caged within her head*’ and ‘*there is little doubt that she will return to her kingdom*’. Thus, we can see how, in *Dissocia*, liminality has a dual and, at times, opposing interaction with Muir, Macdougall and Hadfield’s contentions; a fact entirely in keeping with its nature.

In *Dissocia*, Neilson does not explore liminality as a physical construct, but rather as a mindscape, which is created and peopled by the imagination of his principal protagonist Lisa. As this article has discussed, one of the methods of constructing this liminal terrain is by intertextual allusion to other fantasy worlds. Oz is incorporated through linguistic similarities between worlds; several lines uttered by Lisa seem to be echoes of Dorothy’s, both in thematic content and as responses to stimuli from the plot. The affiliation with *The Wizard of Oz* also emphasises the disparity between the acts. In *Dissocia* ‘the emphasis in the first act is on colour, imagination and variety in all departments’, while ‘the whole point of Act Two is that it is the polar opposite of Act One. There should be no overt colour used in set design, costume or lighting’ (Neilson 2007, p. 2; p. 74). The difference between the acts in *Dissocia* directly mirrors *The Wizard of Oz*, because reality in the film is displayed visually in black and white, as is reality in *Dissocia*: whereas the imaginative world of Oz is a panoply of colour, as is the liminal world of *Dissocia*. One of the *Dissocia* parallels to Narnia comes in the form of methods of entry to the respective realms; both can be accessed via train systems; the other parallel is that in both texts we have

a goat-like creature betraying the heroine whose name begins with the letter L to a villain associated with a colour. The similarity to Dahl's peculiar domain is an 'elevator' that moves horizontally. By this semiotic surfeit of intertextual allusion, Neilson signals that his liminal landscape is in part assembled from components from other fantastical places that his protagonist has imaginative access to.

In *Dissocia*, Neilson investigates liminal terrain by presenting the idea of location hybridity. *Dissocia* is a dream environment, and Lisa's excursion into it could be described as a waking dream, as evidenced by the fact that she dreams up an illusory construct redolent of Sigmund Freud who gives her a pretext for, and a means of entry into, the liminal domain. Upon fully entering *Dissocia*, the hybridity of location is explored via a 'real world analogue'. The locations visited in *Dissocia* trace their lineage from locations in reality; locations such as an airport and a motorway lay-by. Lisa's subconscious associatively constructs imaginative scenarios based on stimuli her consciousness is coming into contact with. And what we are presented with is a theatrical adaptation of these events which has been comically transfigured by the properties of the liminal zone which is *Dissocia*. But in this liminal landscape the scenarios we encounter are not only comedic imaginative fabrications; they are also renderings of encounters in reality. And the depiction of these incidents that we, as audience or reader, are proffered are a coping mechanism which has manifested as a theatrical representation of the actual occurrence: such as the attempted rape by Goat (aka 'Gavin Loxley': Act 1, p. 42). It seems that, figuratively, the real world is a canvas that has been partially painted over, but still retains the essence of what it depicts; reality overlaid with fantasy resulting in liminality.

Neilson utilises sound in several different manners to create, intrude upon and influence the liminal terrain of *Dissocia*. When sounds from reality encroach upon *Dissocia*, it seems to imply that events are spiralling out of control, and the energy required maintaining the mindscape must be redirected into excluding the horror they

represent, thus demonstrating the diaphanous, and membrane-like boundaries of Dissocia. When sound leaves Dissocia and impinges on the real world, it exhibits a dissonant quality, which suggests the transformative, liminal properties of the mindscape. Sound also manifests within the liminal world as an abstractive score which auditorially adds to the texture of the dreamscape and choreographs its action. The liminality of Dissocia also allows for the synthesis of two incompatible styles of songs. This audio integration demonstrates how normal regulations governing norms do not necessarily apply in the liminal land.

As mentioned, Dissocia is a world of association, created by the mental instability of its progenitor. This instability is also evident in its fragmentary nature. This fragmentation is precipitated by the interjection of an avatar which is the allusive depiction of a historical personage's terminology for his own mental illness. As the connection to the mindscape is sundered by this entity, the repercussions of prolonged contact with this liminal realm become apparent: mental illness.

Neilson deploys 'a sudden change of viewpoint' to indicate how the real and quasi-real confluence form a liminal zone. This stratagem could be seen as a theatrical lightning conductor which grounds the opposing worlds and results in liminal terrain within the reality of *Dissocia*. This is represented in the gaps between the scenes in the second act. It is within these gaps that mundane events out with the action of the play are inferred as Lisa incrementally 'recovers' from her trip to her liminal kingdom. By crossing back to reality Lisa's ability to access her inner world is temporarily nullified as the equilibrium that prevents egress from reality to liminality is reinstated. But in the closing moments of the play we see that this balance is only a temporary state of affairs and access to liminality is only a matter of ceasing taking medication.

 Endnotes.

¹ Sierz's commentary (2011) focuses on a broad synopsis of the play and touches upon specific episodes. He also mentions the disparity of form in the respective acts. Bull's criticism (2011) provides a lengthier, more in depth synopsis of the play than Sierz. He also mentions most of the incidents contained within the play in a linear fashion. Reid (2007) is concerned with moving the criticism of Neilson away from his in-yer-face roots. She concentrates on the 'form and textures' (p.489) of *Dissocia* and its companion piece *Realism*. She critiques, in depth, the semiotics of the play-text and performance-text of both productions. She repositions Neilson as a 'more identifiably Scottish artist' (p.490), and argues that this 'can allow for new inflections in the interpretation of his work' (p.491). Reid also provides a persuasive and cogent defence of his work from the attack and misinterpretation it received at the hands of theatre critics such as Nicholas de Jongh and Michael Billington. There is also some interesting testimony from Neilson himself and some of the actors involved in the productions, which include Christine Entwhistle and Matthew Pidgeon (both stalwarts of many of Neilson's shows). Reid (2011) also cursorily discusses *Dissocia* by highlighting how Neilson's work in the new millennium exhibits increasing similarities with more traditionally recognised Scottish theatricality, including 'music-hall and variety-theatre conventions' (p.197) and 'abrupt changes of tone and performance register' (p.198).

²Anthony Neilson in the forward to, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*.

³ See Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

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