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Filming Young Writers at Montsalvat: Intermediality and the creative potential of performed readings

Abstract:

The 2020 March-November coronavirus lockdown period in Melbourne (Australia) led to the suspension of many arts/entertainment programs, but it also provided an opportunity to launch innovative online projects. An informal partnership between Montsalvat artists' colony and La Trobe University in Victoria, allowed the short story winners of La Trobe's 2019 Young Writers' Award to be read for film by professional stage and television actors: Anisha Senarate, Emily Taheny, Cal Wilson and Maude Davey. Initially proposed to Montsalvat as an online alternative to its community arts schedule during intermittent lockdown months, the *Young Writers* project was complete and uploaded in March 2021. The filmed stories, shot on the grounds and in the unique gothic styled buildings of Montsalvat, demonstrate the intermedial possibilities available to contemporary literary and performance-based pedagogy and practice. This article elaborates on the nature and value of this approach to storytelling and references the historical and contemporary nature of performed readings that informed the development of this project.

Biographical note:

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Nicole Skeltys, Australian musician, composer and writer, has released eleven albums (many for major labels) in styles ranging from electronica to psychedelic folk, folk-rock, pop and country. She is best known as one half of seminal electro-femme outfit B(if)tek (1996-2003), who toured with the Beastie Boys, recorded with Twin Peaks chanteuse Julee Cruise, played sold-out shows at the Sydney Opera House and other national venues and festivals, and was nominated for an Aria award. Nicole is currently completing a practice-led PhD – the writing

of a rock opera based around London's finance industry – in Creative Arts at La Trobe University.

Keywords:

Montsalvat, Young Writer's Award, multimodal writing, performed readings

Introduction

For the last six years La Trobe University's (Australia) Department of Creative Arts and English, in conjunction with its cross-disciplinary outreach program, has administered the *Young Writers' Awards*. Third, runner-up and first-place winners are announced at an annual celebratory event. Year 10 students from metropolitan and regional Victoria compete by submitting short stories for assessment by professional writers and educators. The awards ceremony, attended by the top ten students in the competition, their family and teachers, involves each student reading a short extract of their work. A project involving professional actors reading/performing each of the completed stories to camera was designed as a collaborative activity that would benefit both the competing students, the department and the longevity of the competition. Funding for this idea, whether internal to La Trobe or external, proved problematic with the project perceived to fall between the cracks of teaching, research and marketing. Despite these concerns, the pedagogical viability of this intermedial approach to storytelling for budding creative fiction writers was doggedly pursued. With the intermittent Victorian Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, beginning early March 2020, a new opportunity emerged. Local actors with national profiles, finding themselves in a state of professional stasis through cancelled bookings and inadequate government support during 2020's two, three and four lockdown periods, generously agreed to contribute their time and talent to this project. In conjunction with Montsalvat, the historic artists' colony and creative events venue in Melbourne's northern outer fringe (Eltham), Terrie Waddell (La Trobe Screen Studies) and Geoff Paine, a content curator for *Behaviour Works* (Monash University's Sustainable Development Institute), pooled their resources to bring the *Young Writers Awards* project (referred below as YWAP) to fruition (see Paine, 2021 for access to the filmed stories, <https://www.montsalvat.com.au/cinema-program>). The following analysis combines discussions on the development and filming of YWAP, the suitability of Montsalvat as a film location and informal collaborative partner, the concepts of intermediality or multimodality that underpin the work, and the audience-centred performance of literary texts that continued to inspire the original intention of offering the award-winning short stories another lifeform.

Filming at Montsalvat

Community arts organisations, such as Montsalvat, are inadequately resourced by government funding and so remain vulnerable. YWAP evolved as a project to assist Montsalvat in the lockdown months when it was unable to resume its programmed arts schedule (theatre, film, art and music) under distancing restrictions. Planning began in March 2020; however, the collection of four short readings was not complete and uploaded until the following year, due to the various commitments of the participating actors. As part of an informal partnership between Montsalvat and La Trobe University, the project aimed to provide online intermedially focussed content that spanned literature, performance and film for the local Eltham community and its wider urban fringe catchment of the Nillumbik shire. Paine and Waddell established a relationship with Montsalvat through their initiation and participation in the *Cinema at Montsalvat* committee, an initiative aimed at developing regular film screenings on site. The seeds of this venture began in February 2020 with an outdoor screening of *Buena Vista Social Club* (Wenders, 1999), but Covid-19 restrictions in the following months forced the suspension of on-site cinema until February 2021 with a screening of *A Boy Called Sailboat* (Nugent, 2018) accompanied by classical guitarists the Grigoryan Brothers, who provided the live music score. YWAP currently contributes to the development of Montsalvat's digital arts platform – an alternate creative experience for the local, and now global, arts community.

Montsalvat's website describes the organisation as "Australia's oldest continuously active artists' community; a place where art in all its transformative power is celebrated in exhibitions, festivals, concerts, workshops and artist residencies." Painter and architect Justus Jorgensen, with the Skipper family, their friends and students, constructed the first building for the colony in 1937 on 12 acres of Eltham land, 10 kilometres from the iconic Heidi (Heidelberg) artists' colony established in 1934 by Sunday and John Reed, now known as the Heidi Museum of Modern Art (see Morgan & Harding, 2015). Montsalvat currently consists of 30 structures, including galleries, studios, residences, workshops, ornamental ponds, café, chapel, and Great Hall designed in an eclectic mix of French provincial and Gothic styles. Since its inception, Montsalvat has hosted festivals and events celebrating a variety of artforms from poetry, jazz, film, classical and popular music, to sculpture and painting. It has also supported cross-disciplinary artists and entertainers, making the site a welcoming space for the presentation and practice of intermedial work.

As well as production work on YWAP and involvement with the development of *Cinema at Montsalvat* as one of Montsalvat's many volunteers, Paine, a cast member of the Network 10 series *Neighbours* and 2020-2024 Councillor for Wingrove Ward in Eltham, also filmed profiles of the various artists in-residence currently producing work from onsite studios (Montsalvat Arts Centre, *Montsalvat Arts Community*, 2021). The original aim was to incorporate all top ten stories under consideration for the 2019 *Young Writers'* competition, but given the state-wide pandemic restrictions, it was only practical to film the four prize-winning stories: equal third places, *Identity* by Dinali Fernando (Presbyterian Ladies College) read by Anisha Senaratne and *Summer Mornings/Memories* by Ruby Clayton Dowling (University High School) read by Emily Taheny; second place, *The Red Sweater* by Marta Demasson DeGennaro (University High School) read by Cal Wilson; and first place, *Cigarkassen* by Bethany Feik (University High School) read by Maude Davey. Both students and actors signed consent and release forms with the understanding that the readings and stories may be performed publicly (screened) by La Trobe University and Montsalvat. The evocative

photographs or smart phone images that students were asked to provide as a way of augmenting their stories were edited into each filmed reading performance. The actors' availability and their suitability to a particular story guided the casting choices and the shooting locations were determined by the quality of light and sound in Montsalvat's buildings and grounds.

Dinali Fernando's story of a Sinhalese-Australian girl's search for identity while navigating life as the child of migrant parents, modifying her heritage in an attempt to assimilate, and working through an unsettling sense of cultural liminality, was the most difficult story to cast. Given the cultural sensitivities of the Tamil-Sinhalese ethnic divisions, deepened during the country's civil war (1989-2009), the narrative required a Sri Lankan actor from a Sinhalese background. We were fortunate to have Anisha Senaratne recommended to us and available for a reading of Fernando's work in Montsalvat's Upper Gallery. Senarate commented on the sensitivity of the piece and how it eerily resonated with her own experiences. Emily Taheny, known for her character work on ABC's *Shaun Micallef's Mad as Hell*, was well placed to read *Summer Mornings/Memories*. Filmed in the Long Gallery, the piece required three distinct characterisations – mother, father and adolescent narrator – to bring the story to life. Maude Davey and Cal Wilson are both accomplished performers, celebrated in Australian theatre, cabaret and television. Their performances were filmed in the Great Hall's courtyard and the Chapel.

The lack of budget meant that Paine filmed and sound recorded all performances using easily accessible equipment: iPhone 10 with a Moza gimble smartphone stabilizer (steadicam), and Rode Wireless Go for audio. Each session was conducted in compliance with the assembly and distancing rules active in Victoria (2020-21) and editing continued until the final cut upload in March 2021. Although there are competing awards for young writers active in Australia (*Young Writers' Awards*, 2021), YWAP offered an opportunity to expose student work to local, national and global audiences, and contribute to Montsalvat's charter as an arts complex offering a unique experience to students, residents and the wider community. The project also uniquely aimed to encourage the pursuit of creative writing in both its literary and performative aspects.

Multimodality – Intermediality

Before looking at examples of the popularly performed literary readings that inspired YWAP, it is helpful to briefly consider the nature of intermedial texts that informed the initial approach to the project. The term *text* is often correlated with various forms of the written word – etymologically related to the medieval Latin *textus* when the spoken word became inscribed/written on a texture associated with the early “page” (Hoad, 2003). The advent of academic film analysis in the latter half of the twentieth century and advances in digital technologies, saw the reworking of *texts* to incorporate any self-contained work that could be read/interpreted by audiences – audio, visual or written. From 1999 the mobile digital *text message*, for instance, could optionally incorporate the visual aid of emojis to either accompany the typed note with an “emotional subtext” or act as a substitute for the written word (Pardes, 2018). The text then, even in a purely literary sense, is not a contained or even stable artifact, but borrows from earlier literary texts, themes, and genres. Applying audio, visual and

performative influences to the written word further defuses any perceived textural purity (Babbage, 2018). Post-structuralist thought on intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1929; Kristeva, 1969; Barthes, 1968) understood texts as having a leaky rapport with each other – borrowing and reshaping themselves through interactive, or inter-text, exchanges so that, as John Frow (1990) frames it, what we read and view are not so much “structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness” (p. 45). The development of media and screen education since the 1970s was built on the creative variabilities of intertextuality, furthering the discourse to incorporate the reader, viewer and/or listener as intrinsic to the creation/meaning-making of any particular body of work.

The more recent fusion/adaptation/reconfiguration of textual forms across a range of disciplines – a piece of literature reworked as cinema, mini-series, theatre, podcast, audiobook, or a film reworked as theatre – are now analysed as examples of contemporary multimodality or intermediality: flexible terms “for phenomena at the point of intersection between different media, or crossing their borders, or for their interconnection” (Chandler and Munday, 2016). The manipulation of Stanislaw Lem’s classic novel *Solaris* (1961) for example, typifies this practice. After two cinema adaptations by Andrei Tarkovsky (1972) and Steven Soderbergh (2002), *Solaris* was adapted for the stage by David Greig and performed at Australia’s Malthouse Theatre (2019) and Edinburgh’s Royal Lyceum Theatre (2019) with the staged version incorporating elements of the literary and the screen texts while re-gendering the central characters. Employed as an educational means of encouraging creativity and financially capitalising on popularly established recent and classical works by reinventing them for a new medium, intermediality has become a standard, marketable practice in all areas of the arts.

Gabriele Rippl (2015) argues that “Literature’s role and function must ... be appraised in a cultural field characterized not only by the competition and collaboration of different media, but also medial interfaces” (p. 1). The process of literary works that are not only intertextually informed, but now intermedially negotiated, reconstructed and transformed, operates in a kind of playback loop. Audiences can experience various reinventions *before* having read the original text, prompting an engagement with the original or a *return to the original* via hard copy, ebook or serialised podcast (multiplatform) readings. Intertextually and intermedially speaking, literature can never be a “pure” art form, in terms of its reader-reception or its creation, particularly in the digital age. As Frances Babbage (2018) argues of “The *ekphrasis* of adaptation”, it is possible to see that “while theatre strives to make books speak, so too are books reframed to expose their incipient theatricality” (p. 78). This was certainly a key factor in our desire to evolve the short stories of the young writers into another lifeform: the intrinsic performability of each beautifully crafted narrative.

The decision to film the intermedial YWAP at Montsalvat seemed appropriate, not only for the pedagogical, Covid-19 driven marketing and La Trobe-Montsalvat relationship, but also because of the site’s historical and current mandate to engage with a range of arts practices. From 1969 onward, Jorgensen instituted public cultural events that catered to a variety of tastes. The site hosted music festivals – jazz, folk, classical, rock – and a 1970s “festival for Bangladesh” that attracted around 10,000 people “to listen to bands like Captain Matchbox and Skyhooks” (Jorgensen, 2014, p. 230). The famous Montsalvat Jazz Festival, attracting international musicians, was held each year from 1988-1997. Writers and poet’s festivals

attended by literary luminaries, and “lifestyle” festivals celebrating Yarra Valley food and wine growers, and costumed events such as two Renaissance Faires, were part of Montsalvat’s early *raison d’être* as a supporter and promoter of interdisciplinary artists, styles, events and festivals. While a number of memoirs have been written about Montsalvat, its artistic notoriety and legacy, the colony has also championed novelists, poets and book illustrators. Its board chair from 2006-2018 was held by noted journalist, literary prize judge and reviewer Morag Fraser. The 2019 Montsalvat Arts Festival, for instance, featured Melbourne author Gideon Haigh discussing his novel *A Scandal in Bohemia: The Life and Death of Molly Dean* based on the 1930 murder of a young Montsalvat artist’s “muse”, and the writing panel of Katherine Kovacic, poet Bella Li, and Emily Bitto (winner of the 2015 Stella Prize). Montsalvat’s 2020 studio artist in residence, illustrator Marc McBride, has illustrated over 200 book covers, but is best known for his work on Emily Rodda’s *Deltora quest* series and related novels (2000-2013). McBride was featured on Paine’s filmed series of Montsalvat’s studio artists, developed during the filming of YWAP (Montsalvat Arts Centre, *The Battle of Deltora*, part 1, 2021).

The sense of borrowing and interweaving – intrinsic to the recent Grigoryan Brothers live performance of their original soundtrack to the screening of *A Boy Called Sailboat* against the exteriors of the hand-built and gothic-designed great hall, and a dusk craft market with Mexican-related food carts (*Sailboat* was filmed in New Mexico) – has been core to the Montsalvat experience. With its website’s mission statement to “continue to be a living, thriving, creative artistic community ... [aiming] to educate and promote local, national and international cultural practice”, the organisation encourages not only traditional arts-based, theatre, film, literary and music professional and educational practices, but also a fusion of these disciplines by building relationships with Victorian schools and universities through residential scholarships. Facilitating YWAP furthered this intermedial approach to learning and entertainment by incorporating performance, creative writing, film, the promotion of educationally driven initiatives, the engagement of La Trobe University as the closest tertiary institution to the southern Nillumbik catchment where Montsalvat is located, and the architectural legacy of the site.

Reading as performance

The communication of literary works to audiences – the transformation of novel into theatre or cinema texts, audiobooks, filmed script-table readings, minimally staged play readings, and author-moderator conversations focused on various forms of creative writing – are intimately related to the oral traditional of communal storytelling (Wallin & Nolin, 2020). These multimodal forms of reading influenced the development of YWAP and recent examples have further reinforced the value of such performances. North America’s first National Youth Poet Laureate, twenty-two-year-old Amanda Gorman, performing her poem *The Hill We Climb* at the 2021 presidential inauguration of Joe Biden garnered such popularity that Gorman became the first poet invited to perform another original work – *Chorus of the Captains* – at the Super Bowl pregame ceremony (February 6, 2021). Paulette Jiles’ 2016 novel *News of the World*, centred on the nomadic nineteenth-century character of former confederate Captain Jefferson Kyle Kidd (Tom Hanks) who scrapes together a living by reading newspapers at 10 cents per

head to eager rural audiences during the Civil War, has been adapted into a film of the same name (Greengrass, 2021). Prior to the acceleration of Covid-19 in California, the Getty Museum produced a series of annual spring events from 2009 onward – *Selected Shorts: Let Us Tell You a Story* – at the Los Angeles Getty Centre, where noted actors read classical and contemporary short fiction (The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2021). But the most recently conspicuous examples of mediated literary readings as a source of entertainment and inspiration took place during the peak of the pandemic in 2020.

Celebrity readings of children’s story books online during school closure periods became a popular form of community support. English actor Tom Hardy’s *CBeebie Bedtime Stories*, prominent recruits from the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists participating in *Story Online*, and the *Goodnight with Dolly – Imagination Library Bedtime Stories* series where Parton reads self-authored children’s books from the comfort of a large pillow-fluffed bed, are just a few of examples of this trend (Maughan, 2020; Parton, 2021). Plymouth University’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner Big Read*, publicised on its site as “an inclusive, immersive work of audio and visual art from the 21st century”, engaged British actors and authors to read selections of Coleridge’s 1817 poem for digital audiences (internet, Spotify, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Apple Podcasts). Developed over three years the project launched in 2020.

This is of course only a brief sample of the popularity of performed literary works, turning the market for authors into a multi-intermedial proposition embracing visual, audio and print media. While the possibility of extending the reach and form of literature has increased with the evolution of digital entertainment, its performative potential significantly predates twenty to twenty-first century technology. The touring poetry-author readings of Ezra Pound (early twentieth century), Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg (1920s and 1930s), and Dylan Thomas’ American tours (from the 1960s), for example, ushered in the popularity of poetry readings circuits across North America (Hall, 1985). In Southeast Asia, the 1930s-1960s Singaporean practice of multi-dialect Chinese street storytelling, where novels and newspapers were performed as a form of entertainment and information sharing to illiterate audiences, gave way to audio-visual technologies (television and radio). With this shift came the gradual end to the country’s dialect-specific storytelling (Tan, 2021).

But perhaps the most celebrated historical recitals are the public and overtly theatrical readings of nineteenth century author Charles Dickens, popular not just as a marketing strategy for Dickens’s work or a form of popular entertainment for consumers of literature and theatre, but also a means of advancing literacy for the masses. The toll of these events for the aging Dickens is highlighted in Ralph Fiennes’ film *The Invisible Woman* (2013) where Fiennes, in a similar multitasking approach to author-performed readings, directs himself in the title role of Dickens. The British and North American Reading tours in 1858 followed charity readings that were inspired by, according to Malcom Andrews (2008), the popularity of mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century “Penny Readings [one penny fee for admission], subscription reading groups and family reading circles” (p. 51). In the spirit of intermediality and creative flexibility, Andrews notes of these nineteenth century practices, that “Actors could become public Readers: Readers could aspire to acting. Actors, Readers, and writers began to throng the platform to offer these half-literary, half-histrionic entertainments from the mid-century

onwards” (p. 64). The phrase “to throng the platform” – a description of the performance area/stage and the act of commanding attention – is also a suggestive forerunner for the term *media platform* referring to various configurations of digital communication.

After successful tours of England, Dickens’s first New York Reading at Steinway Hall in 1867 – scenes from *The Pickwick Papers* and *A Christmas Carol* – much like his previous performances in Boston, saw ticket queues stretching half a mile, with New Yorkers forming two queues of 800 in each row from 5am: “even a place in those queues could fetch \$20. Mattresses and blankets were brought by the waiting people in hopes of being able to get some sleep. Night temperatures were some way below freezing” (Andrews, 2008 p. 2). An active champion of comprehensive, non-sectarian education, the breadth of Dickens’s public readings with their themes of social inequality and the need for reform provided an entertaining, educative and accessible pathway for both affluent and less economically fortunate audiences (see Litvack, 2011; Dickens, 2012). For his first 1853 charity reading of *A Christmas Carol* in the Birmingham Town Hall, Dickens insisted that free seats be reserved for the working class (Dickens, 2012). It was, unfortunately, only in the year of his death (1870) that parliament eventually passed the United Kingdom’s Education Act.

The pedagogical benefits of performed readings are not unrelated to the nature of textual convergence that Jennifer Rowsell (2013) argued has forced a change in the concept of literacy to include an understanding of production and multiplatform practices. While Dickens’s performed readings maintain the authority of the author, non-authored theatrical and digital readings involve multiple creators of varied disciplines (actors, crew, technicians, marketing staff etc) and platforms to bring the story to life. This kind of convergence not only invites a dynamically expanded sense of literacy in the way Roswell champions the importance of multimodality, but it also encourages a more enhanced experience of the educational value of storytelling as an art form that, “promotes listener engagement, structures information ... conceptual understanding, fosters problem solving and engenders a sense of community and belonging” (Mages, 2020, p. 1). Katherine Batchelor’s research on the creative writing of gifted children also supports the educational benefits of intermediality. In her study of 27 early secondary age students, Batchelor found that when revising their work, multiple modes of interpretation and feedback allowed for access to “deeper abstract thinking”, an enhanced ability to “visualize their writing”, and the reduction of perfectionism that often stifles the creative potential of talented young writers (2018, p. 136). Similarly, Monica Nilsson argues for the efficacy of teaching based on intermediality to facilitate creativity in a broader sense, but more specifically “creative literacy and literary development” (2010, p. 158).

On a more primary level, the heart of storytelling relies on the communication of both narrative information and the more nuanced physical and emotional forms of interpersonal exchange:

Though narrative most certainly originated in oral storytelling – verbal language remaining by far the most powerful mode of signification for the representation of what makes a story a story, namely interactions between humans and between humans and the world – it is safe to assume that it has always relied on the many resources of face-to-face communication: sound, gestures, and facial expressions. From its very

beginning, then, narrative performance has been a multimodal phenomenon. (Grishakova & Ryan, 2010, p. 4)

Even considering the (nonvisual) physical separation of a contained literary text and its reader, the development of narrative writing relies on face-to-face engagement with editors, collaborators, mentors, and fellow authors as intrinsic to the creative process. The *Young Writers' Awards* involved extensive workshop interactions with established writers and teachers who nurtured the development of each child's story, culminating in brief author readings of each work at the final awards night. Literature then, as Grishakova and Ryan imply, is always in a sense, performed face-to-face.

Conclusion

This article has set out to detail the development of the *Young Writers' Award* project, its relationship with the Victorian artists' colony Montsalvat, and its intimate connection to intermedial pedagogy and the educative/entertaining nature of performed readings. As the four short films have only recently been uploaded, the longer-term benefits of this form of multimodality/intermediality at the heart of the project for the collaborating organisations (La Trobe University and Montsalvat), as well as the adolescent writers, are yet to be documented. It is hoped, though, that this relationship between secondary, tertiary, community arts organisations and professional actors will continue to build on, and creatively inform the work of, young adults invested in storytelling. While a filmed project, rather than a live theatrical experience of readings, Donald Hall's sentiment about the joy of performed poetry seems particularly germane. For as Hall (1985) writes of the poet – “like great theater when the actor and audience merge, the poet, saying lines labored over in solitude, reads them returning on the faces of the audience” (p. 77) – our young writers might hopefully re-read their stories through the performance of the actors chosen to animate their work.

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