Oceanic Geographies
The fluid dramaturgy of Caridad Svich

Kevin Brown

Oceanic Geographies
The fluid dramaturgy of Caridad Svich

KEVIN BROWN

Caridad Svich has me thinking about water – about all of the ways that water envelopes us, touches us and affects our lives. Approximately 75 per cent of the human body is water. Water covers more than 70 per cent of the planet. Water has played a part in many significant world events since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Due to global warming, scientists expect worldwide sea levels to rise from three to seven feet by the year 2100, plunging coastal cities underwater. Scientists have discovered that the global water crisis is worse than first reported, exacerbated by pollution in the rivers from pesticides used for agriculture, especially in developing countries in Asia, Africa, Australasia, the Middle East and the Americas. The effects of climate change have created a detectable increase in the frequency of Category 5 cyclones, disproportionately affecting the economically disadvantaged. In 2004, an earthquake underneath the Indian Ocean triggered a tsunami, killing more than 230,000 people from fourteen different countries, with the worst damage seen in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. In 2010, the Deepwater Horizon (BP) oil spill spewed millions of barrels of petroleum into the Gulf of Mexico, causing irreparable environmental damage and wreaking economic devastation on hundreds of thousands of people who rely on the ocean to make a living. On the beaches of the Aegean Sea, where it is said Odysseus once sailed, the body of a drowned Syrian boy washed ashore as his family tried to flee their war-torn homeland. Now an image of the limp, lifeless body of the child has become a haunting emblem of the worldwide immigration crisis. Water gives us life, but it is also an element of destruction – a force that must be reckoned with – both in life and in art.

However, when we talk about performance, our language is consistently laced with metaphors of the land. Our theories must be 'grounded'. Artists reflect on 'returning to their roots'. Actors perform research into their character's 'background'. The definitions of the terms we coin must be 'solid'. We 'dig in' to our research in order to 'uncover new ground'. Philosophers debate about the nature and significance of the 'presence' of the human body. What about the aspects of performance that are liquid, are not of the earth, but of the water?

Caridad Svich describes *The Orphan Sea* as 'a waterscape play'. She wrote the play and I directed its world premiere at the University of Missouri during the autumn of 2014. Then, during the summer of 2015, I directed and performed in a staged, telematic reading of the play as part of the North Atlantic cluster of the Performance Studies international (PSi) 'Fluid States' conference. The theme of the meeting was 'telematic presence'. Events were convened simultaneously in Copenhagen (Denmark), Nuuk (Greenland) and Tórshavn (the Faroe Islands). Svich's play uses characters drawn from Homer's *The Odyssey* and the metaphor of a sea that is orphaned to provide a space upon which to discuss a wide variety of issues – the environment, migration and the sense of nausea brought on by the contemporary trappings of technology.

Svich explains her approach to *The Orphan Sea* in the article 'Archipelagos, Fragile Shores, and Orphan Seas: A reflection on climate change and performance':

Dramaturgically, the piece is a waterscape play. Its structure is intentionally fluid, and designed to mimic, not in a figurative fashion, the ebb and tide, currents and flow of many oceans across the globe. Thus, it is a sea play not only in terms of its title but also its design. (Svich 2015a)

Instead of a landscape play, as Svich describes much of her earlier work, it is a waterscape play. Svich elaborates, 'That suspended place of the ocean, which has its own force and its own very particular energy field, becomes an unstable kind of waterscape' (Svich 2015b).

Before I left home to travel over the ocean from the United States to Copenhagen in order to attend the North Atlantic cluster of the globally distributed PSi conference, I interviewed Svich. We talked about the play and some of her recent writing, a (fluid) body of work she calls her 'water plays'. Some she considers water plays include *Alchemy of Desire / Dead-Man's Blues*, *Archipelago*, *Away Down Dreaming*, *De Troya*, *Hide Sky*, *Perdita Gracia*, *Prodigal Kiss*, *The Tropic of X*, *The Way of Water*, *Twelve Ophelias*, *Wreckage* and *Upon the Fragile Shore*. Svich explains, 'with some it's about the memory of water, with others it's about water and the horizon line, and with others the actual dramaturgy reflects wateriness' (Svich 2014). Thinking about the connections between these plays, water and my experience collaborating with Svich, I have come to understand her approach as a kind of 'liquid dramaturgy': fluid in its structure, form, content and production.

The script is poetic and choral, and does not contain any delineation of lines. Tides of energy ebb and return, and waves of emotion oscillate from peak to nadir. Topics coexist layer upon layer, not as the strata of rock in a landscape, but as thermoclines in the depths of a waterscape. Themes are deliberated within the language of the play, but are also brought to contemplation through visual dream signs, inventing a new kind of dramaturgical language. Beyond these elements of fluidity, Svich's work calls out for an activist response to global emergencies brought on by the destruction of the environment, humanitarian
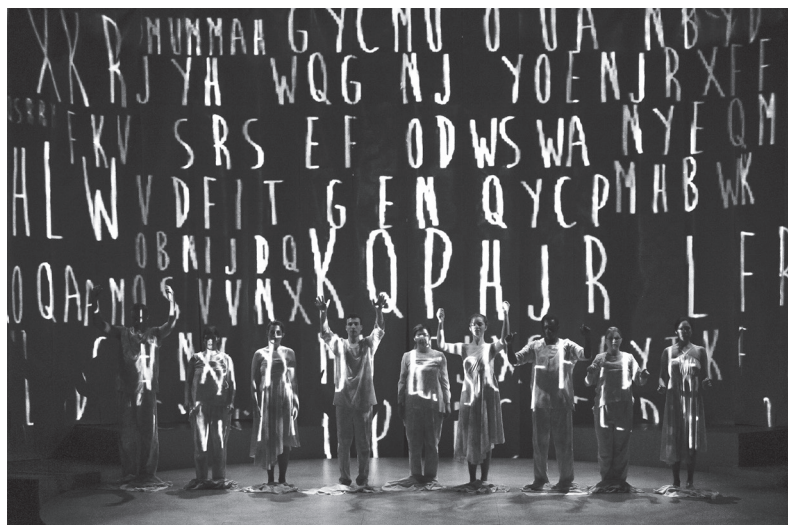
concerns of border crossings and immigration and questions of the sustainability of technological 'progress'.

■ Cast of The Orphan Sea, University of Missouri, 16 November 2014. *Photo Rebecca Allen*

AQUEOUS DEVELOPMENT

It's a hot day during the summer of 2014. I am swimming in the pool at the outdoor Beach Club where I get my exercise these days. I find swimming meditative. It helps me think. It helps me write. The churning swish and visceral rhythm of my body propelling through the water drowns out distracting noise. The stress and strain of the day is extinguished through pure exhaustion. Rays of sunlight penetrate, refracting through the surface and reflecting off the walls and floor of the pool. This dance of underwater light reminds me of a documentary I once saw about Dr Masaru Emoto's experiments with the crystallization of water. Emoto exposed glasses of water to various vibrations of energy, and then photographed the resulting patterns. Perhaps if all of humanity could learn to send out positive vibrations, all of the world and its inhabitants would reverberate in the same way, sparkling and translucent. As I continue to swim, I think about the play that I will be directing with Caridad Svich this fall. After my weekly exercise, I come home dripping, boot up my computer and see that she has sent me an email. Attached is the first draft of the play.

As I read through the preliminary stage directions, the list of characters and the first few stanzas of text, the jubilation of discovery drains away, slowly replaced by a sense of foreboding and fear. The prose is lovely. That is not the problem. The uneasiness I feel is

not due to the content of what I am reading but, rather, the form. This play is unlike any I have ever read before. In place of distinctly delineated individual characters, Svich has incarnated three choruses: 'The Chorus of those that cross rivers and seas, including Odysseus', 'The Chorus of those that wait for those who are crossing, including Penelope, and The One who Searches for the Lover Long Gone' and 'The Chorus of the City, including The Voice of the River, The Neighbor and The Voice of the Road'. Rather than a 'traditional' script with lines labelled clearly with the names of the characters who speak them, I find what could be more accurately described as a 'performance text' comprised of forty-two poems, formatted and arranged on the page with deliberate care in what, on first inspection, seems to be some kind of encrypted code. The themes are complex and the symbolism multivalent. At one moment the characters are confronting environmental degradation, and the next moment they are lamenting the plight of refugees. The timeline jumps from prehistory to the present day, sometimes simultaneously (dis)located in multiple eras. Later, Svich tells me that she wanted to write what she calls 'flash scenes'. She explains,

> I wanted to write one page scenes, and have them kind of tumble on top of each other – scenes that are zooming into something and then zooming out, but that are also kind of speaking to each other in a collage kind of way. (Svich 2015b)

The text is cinematic, a fluid condensation of images more typical of a screenplay than a traditional script.

Weeks after my first reading of *The Orphan Sea*, Svich travels to Missouri to participate with our actors in a week-long workshop of the play. I meet her at her hotel, and give her a short tour of the city of Columbia on the way to our first rehearsal. Caridad is much as I imagined her: somewhat soft-spoken, meticulously intellectual, kind-hearted and with a dry sense of humour. As she begins to talk about her play, things begin to slowly come into focus. She pauses before she speaks, carefully crafting her thoughts. I instinctively come to feel that

the confusion I encountered during my first reading of the play is unfounded. She begins to help me delve into the depths of meaning in the play. She outlines the way that her deliberate placement of text is a kind of 'poetics of the page'. The directions in parentheses are optional, and could be considered either stage directions or dialogue (or both). Text that is right justified represents a contrapuntal voice. Spaces in-between the lines represent beat changes, sometimes pauses and sometimes changes in the direction of the action. Svich takes on the role of Sea Captain, here to guide us over uncharted aquatories.

The rehearsal process of *The Orphan Sea*, much like the play itself, is different from any I have ever led. The fluidity of the script leads to a process more 'liquid' than any I have experienced in my years of directing. During the audition process, instead of presenting monologues and cold readings, the actors are broken into groups and given fragments of the text, with instructions to put the text on its feet, to embody the text with movement and gesture. Rehearsal does not flow linearly, but floats from point to point, swirling in various and sometimes contradictory directions, depending on the tidal pull from the necessity of each moment. A fluid dramaturgy demands a special kind of actor – an actor comfortable with an intensely collaborative process, creative and intellectual, and able to translate words on a page into feelings and ideas expressed collectively through the cast's instruments of body and voice.

The workshop with Svich progresses in a similar, fluid fashion as the auditions. The actors are given a large degree of freedom. Our collaboration with the actors reflects methods of devising, rather than more conventional directorial roles. The actors are given feedback and guidance in order for them to feel safe enough to explore the play on their own. Sometimes we use music to inspire the actors to move. Multiple iterations of embodiment are presented and refined, sometimes discarded in the spirit of generation, other times recorded on video in order to augment memories of the epiphanies and realizations that we want to

keep. At the end of the week, as Caridad leaves to fly back to New York, the actors and I feel a sense of accomplishment. We have tackled what at first seemed like an impenetrable text, and have embarked on an adventurous journey at sea.

THE WAY OF WATER

It is some time early in the morning. As a passenger on a Boeing 777 flying over the Arctic Circle passing rapidly through multiple zones, my sense of time has been confounded. I am on my way home from the North Atlantic cluster of the year-long, globally dispersed Performance Studies international 'Fluid States' conference. The event I attended was held simultaneously in Copenhagen (Denmark), Tórshavn (Faroe Islands) and Nuuk (Greenland). It was between and betwixt these physical localities, connected through virtual space, where I staged a telematic reading of Svich's play *The Orphan Sea*. The passengers around me are slowly stirring from their mid-flight slumber. I am raised to consciousness by a quiet commotion. I see several people holding cameras with telephoto lenses, taking pictures out of the rear window, breathlessly whispering. As I join them, looking out of the window, I am immediately floored by an overwhelming sight: thousands of feet below us, I see an arctic land/sea-scape of miles of glaciers that are in the process of rapidly melting. Burnished, white, snow-capped peaks are covered in ice – but, receding into valleys, where the shoreline meets the sea, there is an unmistakable accumulation of yellowing slush. Chunks of the glacier are dropping into the water, floating out to sea like ice cubes melting in a glass of freshly made tea on a hot summer day. Each berg, infinitely tiny from my vantage point, but every one undoubtedly as large as a small mountain, leaves a trail in the water like a drunken snail, until it disappears, assimilated into the ocean. It makes me want to break down and cry.

The spectacle reminds me of a scene in *The Orphan Sea* when, near the three-quarter mark (to use a fluid measurement of volume), a pair of the Odysseus / Penelope travellers are stranded

in a hut on an ice floe. Without mobile devices to connect them to the rest of the world, they contemplate suicide and sing 'The Desperate Song of No Access'. Finally forced to confront the reality of their mutual co-presence, they realize that they have each other to keep one another company, to keep themselves warm, to restart a human family. Themes connecting the destruction of the environment and the plight of refugees crossing bodies of water recur throughout the play. At one point the chorus mourns, 'Two hundred years from now, our crossing will not make the headlines, because all borders will have flooded' (Svich 2016: 152).

As an example of fluid dramaturgy, the play uses characters drawn from Homer's *The Odyssey* as a backdrop on which to pin a variety of themes, mythological and contemporary. Multiple themes flow through the play, like snow-capped waves cresting on the surface of an orphaned sea: migration, global warming, and the sense of nausea brought on by the modern trappings of technology that separate us from one another more often than they brings us together. Svich describes the play as

> a multi-choral epic poem for the stage. Through the story of Odysseus and Penelope, it examines issues related to crossing borders (physical, geographic, and emotional), migration, climate change, and the isolation and sense of outrage individuals may experience in major metropolitan cities, especially those driven by neoliberal economic values. (Svich 2015a)

When I ask Svich about the fluid nature of her writing, she laments the fact that land-passage plays get staged more than water-passage plays, at least in the United States. She notes: 'With land passage plays the borders seem very fixed and very clear, but with water passage plays you're dealing with water. It's liquid. It's fluid. As soon as you're in the water, you can't place those borders' (Svich 2015b).

The structures and devices used in the play confluence within a pool of cinematic, visual language, at once referential and reflexive. Svich explains, 'the text is open. Lines may be assigned depending on the number of voices in each chorus and the piece encourages a strong

choreographic aesthetic as well as the organic use of mediated elements (mainly video and projection design)' (Svich 2015a). The choruses of multiple Penelopes and Odyssei contemplate how their stories will be told in the future:

[M]aybe they will be called cave paintings, or maybe they will be called images painted on tapestries and vases, or maybe they will be made of silver spools called film, or invisible spools we call media, media material, is that what our lives are? (Svich 2016: 184)

In terms of the structure, Svich explains, 'To me the waterscape plays function more structurally like surfing plays, if you want to use that metaphor, so that the board is the play and it's riding the waves' (Svich 2015b). These are waves of energy and emotion, upon which the threads of narrative, along with audience members, are carried forth along with Odysseus's journey of departure and return. I ask Caridad if a narrative structure based on fluidity can be seen as an alternative to linear, Aristotelian narrative structures, and also to circular, feminist narrative structures. She answers, 'It's not anti-Aristotle, that idea that you're reaching the peak and then its over. It's not about that. It's always cresting and it's always receding, sometimes we're in the current and sometimes we're out of the current' (Svich 2015b).

In the University of Missouri production of the play, working with scenic and media designer Brad Carlson, our approach to integrating video elements was always predicated by a question of how the mediated elements best served to help tell the story that the play wanted us to tell. The design of the play fused elements of classical dramatic architecture within a contemporary cinematic structure. At the centre of the space lay a circular 'orchestra', the 'dancing place' that any Athenian citizen, somehow transported here from ancient times, would have immediately recognized. The orchestra was surrounded by a towering, wraparound IMAX-style projection screen built from recycled plastics reclaimed from a local pig farm. The projections were transmitted from five projectors, the images fused by a powerful computer running Isadora

software. Sometimes the images were relatively still, providing a backdrop to the action. At other times the videography became much more active, joining the movement of the actors in musical dance sequences.

Many performances that incorporate new media elements strive for an immersive environment, creating a sense of being surrounded or dipped in liquid. However, our production of *The Orphan Sea*, spurred by Svich's directive in the script that mediatized elements should be used, went a step further by providing a submersive environment in which the audience descends into the depths of active meditation for the duration of the play. As Svich explains, the cinematic elements of the performance 'effect the presentation, dislocation and re-locations of voice / sound / body' (Svich 2014). Thus, the audience is sub-merged (forced into and under the action), in the same way that a submarine travels to the bottom of the ocean, under a fluid state of consciousness, probing the depths of their being with the flowing dreamscape of Svich's dramaturgy.

OCEANIC TELEGRAPHY

The theme of the North Atlantic cluster of the Performance Studies international conference was 'telematic presence'. At each location of this event, dispersed in space but synchronous in time, a central meeting room was set up with a 'stage', approximately fifty feet long and twenty-five feet wide. At each end of the stage was a large projection screen. At the midpoint of the stage there was metallic scaffolding mounted with liquid crystal display (LCD) projectors on each side. Cameras and microphones embedded in the middle of each screen transmitted images and sounds to the other locations via computers running videoconferencing software. For example, in Copenhagen, the location where I attended, one end of the space linked to Nuuk and the other end to Tórshavn. The result was an extended, multi-faceted telematic space, in which conference-goers in all three locations could

watch keynote speakers, respond to questions from the audience, enjoy performances and talk to one another in-between panels.

I travelled to the conference to present an 'audio paper' about my collaboration with Svich on *The Orphan Sea*. As part of the programme I was asked to arrange a staged reading of the play, and set about the task of trying to recruit actors from all three locations to perform the play in the telematic space. With limited time to rehearse and present the performance, I created a half-hour cutting of the play, and set times to meet with the actors via Skype™. As the script is poetic and choral, and does not contain delineations of lines, we devised a convention in which we rotated reading the lines of the play stanza by stanza, occasionally speaking in unison. The order of performers was a set rotation, ensuring a sense of alternation between the locations.

This undertaking was extremely experimental and, at times, felt like we were flying by the seat of our pants (or rather swimming by the seat of our suit). Despite the temporal limitations, this experiment revealed some extremely interesting findings. For example, we found that in those moments where we attempted to speak in unison, the Skype™ software attempted to give focus to only one of the speakers, cutting the volume of the others. Presumably, the software performs this function because it is not intended for aesthetic performances, but business transactions. In this way, the institutionalized deep structures of capitalism are embedded in the technology that we use for performance. This betrays a terrestrial, bordered, linear and binary approach to functionality (as opposed to fluid). Thus, the structure of international commerce is hegemonically built into the technological devices that are meant to bring us together, privileging the individual over the collective.

We also found some limitations of the telematic space itself. For example, if the volume was turned up too loud, it caused feedback, the sound waves looping through the microphones and speakers, an artefact of the delay between the spaces. Quantum physics paradoxically predicts that all matter is both particle and wave. The fluid media materials used in this performance vibrated with ripples of sound, flowing through the amplified, telematically enclosed circuit, refusing to be contained in a solid state.

All in all, the performance was successful, suggesting a multitude of possibilities for future iterations when time and space are not as limited. Later, reflecting on the performance in communication with Svich and the actors via email, Svich reveals, 'I keep thinking that the piece could work well in a site-responsive setting – outdoors or against the backdrop of landscape. Or as a series of installations / podcasts / tableaus / short digital films / songs / across an entire city' (Svich 2015b).

UPON THE FRAGILE SHORE

One of the creature comforts of the house that my wife and I live in is a small 'water feature' in the backyard. When we first moved in five years ago, the pond was stocked with three colourful koi carp and two large goldfish. Through the years we have painstakingly tried to take care of the fish, keeping the fragile ecosystem in balance. Over these years, we have only lost one of them, to a feeding raccoon when we were out of town. Yesterday, all of the rest turned up dead. It was a kind of industrial accident, albeit on a miniature scale. Perhaps due to the changing climate, it had not rained in many days and so, as I usually try to do when caring for the pond, I attempted to fill it with more water – too much water. To my dismay, the chlorine that the city puts in the water to kill the microorganisms, that would otherwise make it unsafe for humans to drink, ended up killing all of the fish. I found them belly up, floating in the pond. The chemicals had destroyed the delicate tissue of their gills, and they could no longer breathe.

It was devastating. I am an animal lover. I am an environmentalist. As I dug an earthly grave for my small friends, I cried, not only for these four poor little creatures, but for all of the poor little creatures. I thought about the millions of

dead fish, aquatic mammals and seabirds that go belly up, found floating in our oceans and lakes each year, victim to environmental conditions and toxins created by humans. I think about the thousands upon thousands of refugees fleeing wars in the Middle East, trapped at border crossings, but not allowed to enter because of arbitrarily drawn, invisible lines and a growing sense of xenophobia in the world that is utterly terrifying. I think about the millions of children that go hungry and thirsty every day. They do not have enough food to eat or safe water to drink, through no fault of their own, but due to economic conditions beyond their control. My mind is flooded with the image of the dead body of a young boy face down in the sand, washed up on the shore of the Aegean Sea.

Beyond these elements of fluidity, Svich's work calls out for an activist response to global emergencies brought on by the destruction of the environment, humanitarian concerns of border crossings and immigration, and questions of the sustainability of technological 'progress'. What can we do? It is not enough to 'like' a page on Facebook or change over to a vegetarian diet. We need to become more aware and conscientious, but also take action. We must change our behaviour on a daily basis. As artists and scholars, we need to go beyond performance strategies fixed in the terrestrial condensation of 'presence'. WE ARE KILLING OURSELVES AND THE PLANET WITH OUR PRESENCE. We must find another way. We must not support those who perpetuate the economic and environmental conditions that disproportionately affect the fragile, the poor and the innocent. At the crescendo of *The Orphan Sea*, the multiple choruses, three now joined as one, call for 'reparations, equity, a bit of kindness, [and] we wait for answers, but equity, you see, seems hard to find' (Svich 2016: 200). Our responses to these problems must be fluid.

Like Odysseus torn from Penelope, we sail upon a sea that is orphaned. Against all hope, we drift upon the darkness, with trust that we will find our love. We must re-learn to navigate oceanic geographies, and return to the pod to make us whole. We have been cut off from our humanity, and embarked upon a voyage to find it once again. Perhaps we can begin by sharing stories that are not so rooted in terrestrial narratives only travelling from point A to point B. By emulating fluid states, such as those inhabited by Svich, a liquid dramaturgy that flows upon waves of energy and emotion, we can inspire others to follow us on this adventure. We can turn away from the Homeric: episodic, linear tropes of conflict and progressivism – toward more free-flowing, complex, three-dimensional stories that spirit us home. As we close our eyes and surrender to the pull of the tide, we feel the forces flowing beneath the surface. Instead of swimming against the stream, we learn to ride their currents, and then pull ourselves on top and surf their strength. Borders dissolve and become porous membranes. Objective bodies and subjective identities melt, synthesized into one human volume, at peace with one another and in harmony with the environment. Our utopian artistry sends out shockwaves of positive vibration, inspiring others to resonate with us – crystallized, effervescent and beautiful. Paradoxically, if the same element that gives us life is not treated with care, we will be poisoned. We will go belly up. We must forget mythologies that in solid form separate us from our environment and our common humanity. We must re-learn the fluid stories of the world, and re-chart them into liquid cartographies. Otherwise, sea levels will continue to rise, and we will all be flooded out with too much water.

REFERENCES

Svich, Caridad (2014) Personal communication, Email, 12 August.

Svich, Caridad (2015a) 'Archipelagos, Fragile Shores, and Orphan Seas: A reflection on climate change and performance', *HowlRound*, 23 September, http://howlround.com/archipelagos-fragile-shores-and-orphan-seas-a-reflection-on-climate-change-and-performance, accessed 14 February 2016.

Svich, Caridad (2015b) Personal communication, Interview, 1 June.

Svich, Caridad (2016) *JARMAN (all this maddening beauty) and other plays*, Bristol and Chicago, IL: Intellect.