Practice within a practice within a practice: digital inclusions in theatre performance and the shifting frame of mise en abyme

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Abstract

Novelist André Gide coined the literary concept of mise en abyme as a work within a work, a play within a play, a picture within a picture. This article examines and tests conventional accounts of mise en abyme in relation to the production of an Australian stage-play The Sand Dwellers: this piece is set in a fictional Australian commercial television current affairs production office and the production incorporates representations of journalism “product” that are digital creations. By analysing the appropriateness of notions of abyme to this multimedia production our understanding of the concept of mise en abyme is expanded. At the same time the concept illuminates several aspects of the play text and performance: key narrative devices in the play’s story arc, the position of the writer-creator and, fourthly, the relationship between the play’s character subjects (creative industries practitioners in the form of journalists and news crews) and the creative industries theatre and screen drama practitioners who portray them. In addition, the analysis of abyme characteristics as they are employed in this production extends our understanding of the role that can be played by digital creations integrated into contemporary theatre. In a broader creative industries context, another meaning applied to abyme, “into the abyss”, highlights the propensity of digital technology to infinitely reproduce and eternally relocate work after the primary artist has ceased engaging with it.

Introduction

André Gide’s concept of mise en abyme has revealed layers of complexity the more it has been explored by scholars over the past century. Debate over which elements and characteristics are essential for mise en abyme cannot be resolved easily: blurred definitions and shape-shifting are further defining aspects of abyme. By examining how the device operates in various ways within my play, The Sand Dwellers, I will demonstrate its importance for bringing to audience consciousness the existence of the playwright being who has launched their theatre experience. I will also show how mise en abyme aptly conceptualises Sand Dwellers audience experience of those performances delivered digitally to them alongside onstage performances. Both of these properties, it will be further seen, contribute to the contested reflexivity characteristic and function of Gide’s abyme concept. Descriptions of both the Sand Dwellers text and use of digital elements in this production will be provided for this discussion at various points. But first, to prepare for analysing Sand Dwellers through mise en abyme, we must consider how Gide described the concept and how later scholars have interpreted it.

Mise en Abyme: contested essentials

Gide drew on heraldry to coin the literary and artistic concept of mise en abyme: to place something en abyme means to depict it in the middle of a shield (Whatling 2; Ron 431), usually a smaller shield with its own bearings affecting the meaning of the bearings on the main shield. Gide refers to mirrors in specific works of art providing (or reflecting) a smaller version of what is in the larger painting (Whatling 2); he cites several of his own works as novels which employ the device and names the play scene in Hamlet as a theatrical example (Whatling 2). For Gide the mere presence of an embedded image or narrative within a larger whole did not of itself constitute mise en abyme: the thing contained needed to resemble that thing
containing it, but this required only resemblance or representation, not replication. Differences between the larger and the smaller were an important element of Gide’s *mise en abyme* and contributed to its—albeit, contested—reflexive or informing function (Whatling 2).

Discourse on *mise en abyme* gained momentum after the 1977 release of Dallenbach’s seminal work (Bal; Jefferson; Hutcheon; Ron) with new attention in more recent decades (White; Livingston; Genette; Macris; McHale). McHale says *mise en abyme* is “exhilarating” (176) because it presents problems—especially of definition. As already said, scholars argue over what must be present to constitute *abyme* and there are two different core ideas by which *mise en abyme* is known.

One version focuses on the abyssal potential of facing mirrors (an “abyssal” quality in the dictionary sense of *unfathomable and limitless*). This is best understood by the physical phenomenon of opposing mirrors reflecting each others’ images into infinity. Related to this is the sense of “abyssal” meaning “deep… having great spatial extension or penetration downward or inward from an outer surface or backward or laterally or outward from a centre; sometimes used in combination” (Farlex). These notions of the unfathomable and infinite spatial extension deriving from Gide’s reference to mirrors (Dallenbach 52; Ron 418, 421) are famously exemplified in 20th century film-making in the closing scene of *All About Eve*. Interestingly, while Gide referred to the mirror depicted in paintings and to *Hamlet’s* play within a play he did not refer to Banquo’s mirror in *Macbeth*. The dialogue description of a Banquo likeness replicated back and forward in time to represent future and past generations of Banquo is an example of the “abyssal” or “deep” properties attributed to *mise en abyme*. The *Quaker Oats* packet illustration that contains a picture of itself, thus taking its own image into unending representation in descending miniature, is also referenced in *abyme* discussions (McHale 177) but often dismissed as inappropriate. However, even though *abyme’s* infinitely abyssal nature and resulting reader/audience vertigo are not accepted by all scholars these disputed characteristics still influence how *abyme* is understood. This view of the abyss will be applied later to consider multi-platform performance and delivery in the digital age.

The other meaning refers to the insertion of a representation of the whole into or onto the whole: Ron gives a simple definition of this *mise an abyme* meaning as “Any diegetic segment which resembles the work where it occurs is said to be placed en abyme” (436). McHale dismisses as too strict those interpretations that insist a *mise en abyme* only occurs in works that contain themselves such as *Don Quixote* or Gide’s *The Counterfeiters* (*Les Faux-Monnayeurs*); likewise he dismisses Livingston’s decree that an authentic *abyme* must, as in Gide’s novel, bear the name of the whole within which it sits. McHale and Ron favour using two less stringent criteria: first, there must be an analogous relationship between the *en abyme* and the whole (That is it should be a scaled down model of the whole thing, text or story or of a substantial part of the whole); second, the item within must be inset one or more levels down or “in” from the primary world so that it is *or is part of a secondary world “ontologically subordinated to the primary one* (McHale 177) or what Ron calls a “diegetic downshift” (419).

McHale’s “three dimensions of modelling” (178) that he terms “models, manuals and maps” to classify functions performed at different times by *abyme* will also be used to analyse *Sand Dwellers*. Scholars hesitate to accept Dallenbach’s contention that the *abyme* is a modality of reflection (Ron 418) or necessarily a cognitive aid to the overarching work (Ron 419) but doubters concede that it is linked to *repetition* and *self reference a la* the heraldic interpretations on which the *abyme* term is based (Ron 419) and, that as a consequence of being part of the larger work, help communicate it (McHale 178). Ron (422) agrees with Bal that a *mise en abyme* refers to the whole within which it sits by resemblance but does not have to contain all the elements of the whole or replicate it. Bal says (124), though this is contested by others (Ron 428), that an *abyme* must be *isolatable* from the whole through an interruption and by being, of itself, an independent, extractable whole.

**Sand Dwellers**: Intention, incidence and accidents of reflexivity, *mise en abyme* and writer intrusion

The *Sand Dwellers* stage-play is set in the production office of fictional Australian current affairs television
program “24/7”. This paper discusses its premiere production at Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre (BMEC) in Bathurst NSW Australia. The play depicts the unscrupulous methods used by an executive producer, Jeremy, to create on a shrinking budget TV stories which will boost his program's ratings. Other characters are manipulated to Jeremy's requirements. This includes some being sent inconveniently interstate; another character, Susan the network lawyer and former journalist, takes a serious career tumble at Jeremy's hands, only to re-emerge at the end of Sand Dwellers as the vindicated whistleblower unmasking Jeremy's villainy. I consciously planned at the start of writing to use this world I already knew (as a former broadcast journalist) to critique Australia's post White Australia xenophobia and unfinished emergence from colonialism. To this end, this piece plays homage to earlier Australian playwriting that located itself naturalistically in a definite Australian place and time and asked questions then about Australia's national infancy and maturity (Don's Party being an obvious example). At third draft stage—on advice from one of the dramaturgs I consulted—I began scripting digital television “product” and incorporating it in the theatre script. I intended these “digital artefacts” to progress the plot, paint the world of television journalism for the audience and/or hold television journalism practice up to scrutiny. These digital insertions included a fictional television “news story”, an excerpt from a fictional critical television program “Media Eye”, program “promos” and a so-called “goof reel” (of a reporter and camera crew bungling a story assignment). Other multimedia elements were suggested by stage director Becky Russell and the BMEC theatre in-house producer Kylie Shead. This included skyping actors’ live performances onto onstage screens from an offstage room, interacting in real time with actors on stage, to indicate their fictional distance from the newsroom where the main action was set. Historical images as scene backdrops—depicting iconic moments in Australian history—were also written into scene notes to provide a reflexive framing or relief to the onstage action. (They were justified in the plot through a second fictional television program “Australian Gold” which will be analysed for its various abyme-ic elements in greater detail later). I knew then about the concept of mise en abyme but didn’t realise these digital elements I was scripting into my play might constitute abyme. (This unconsciousness accords with Bal's view (Ron 422) that author intent is no criterion for measuring the presence of mise en abyme.)

The Foot-in-the-Door Goof reel

(see Foot-in-the-Door Short Digital Film Cast Notes & Shooting Script and Sand Dwellers Scene containing embedded Foot-in-The-Door Short Digital Film)

This digital insert used in Sand Dwellers depicts a reporter and camera crew (actors who were not members of the onstage cast) entering a property to surprise a fictional member of the public (also played by an actor not among the core onstage cast) with questions about his business practices. This ambushing by reporters and camera crews is known in Australia and elsewhere as “foot-in-the-door” journalism. This segment is played on screen in an early scene of Sand Dwellers as two characters consider it for inclusion in a so-called “goof reel” or “Christmas tape”. (“Goof reel” is one term for compiled remnants of television news material usually containing embarrassing reporter gaffes and played at end-of-year network Christmas parties). The section of the stage-play script where this segment is incorporated and the shooting film script used to create it are attached for comparison. This particular digital element does not propel the stage plot but does help to build the world of the play for the audience, and this is just one of the ways it functions as mise en abyme.

In fact, because of all the abyme characteristics and functions it exhibits, this component of Sand Dwellers has the strongest claim of all the elements that will be discussed here to being a mise en abyme. The segment is identifiable as a complete and separate whole and thus meets the Bal test of being isolatable. This separateness is established by “interruption” (required by Bal) and provided by the imaginary on/off button activated by one of the onstage characters viewing the goof-reel segment. Separateness is also created physically: it is bounded within an onstage screen viewed by the audience as a television screen monitor that performs as a television screen monitor in onstage action. In this way it is made isolatable in the visual way recommended by Ron (428) when he suggested a painting referred to in a narrative or a play is aided in meeting the isolatable test by the physical boundaries provided by its frame (my italics). In this case this frame is provided physically by the onstage TV screen frame that is viewed by both onstage
characters and the theatre audience. The segment is also verbally framed: firstly, the screen and various segments of vision which appear within it throughout the play are acknowledged in actor dialogue and action; secondly, the goof reel segment itself is also referred to specifically by the actors in the scene within which it is shown to the audience. In this way the audience joins with the play's characters to experience the digital content as they do; however, they are also one level removed from that digital frame of the television by the frame of the proscenium arch. This becomes important when considering another element of *mise en abyme*.

As already mentioned, important to Ron, Bal and McHale's definitions of *mise en abyme* is the notion that the *abyme*—the item within—must be ontologically subordinate to the primary world within which it is placed (McHale 177) thus representing a “diegetic downshift” (Ron 419). McHale uses the example of the less familiar “other” world that characters in science fiction (themselves occupying at all times an “other” world) might encounter in their space travels. This other world is ontologically subordinated by being of alien experience to the characters and so is an alien world within an alien world to consumers of the text, film or television series. The goof reel segment seems at first to be the same world rather than other world in this sense—the world of commercial television current affairs and which is also the world of the play. However, the segment meets the “diegetic downshift” test in two ways: firstly, the characters and action contained in it are secondary characters with no significance to the plot; secondly, because the goof reel captures moments from a fictional recent past that occurred at another place from the action before the audience on stage, it is at least one step removed from the primary audience experience of the theatre work within which it is contained.

**McHale’s model, manual and map**

McHale's proposal of three functional roles of the *mise en abyme* as model, manual or map can in some ways all apply to the foot-in-the-door goof reel segment. In McHale’s “model” a *mise en abyme* resembles or reflects in miniature the whole work within which it has been placed (179). In Paul Auster’s film *The Music of Chance* the hosts to two entrapped houseguests at the heart of the film have created a scale model of their estate with figures to represent specific people found within it. Some of what happens to the visitors is foreshadowed or reported in miniature through changes made anonymously to figures in the model. This is a physical example of the miniature model of the whole; McHale meant this doll’s house concept to apply to textual miniatures within the novel or play narrative (such as the play within a play in *Hamlet* where “The Murder of Gonzago” portrays similar murderous circumstances to those in which Hamlet’s father died and mother remarried). For *Sand Dwellers*—and all theatre using multimedia—this miniature model of the whole, if desired, can be neatly provided by digital elements.

The goof reel segment elucidates this use because the action it portrays reflects in less than three minutes what occurs across the two acts of *Sand Dwellers*. In the main plot a pillar of the community is investigated by the fictional “24/7” current affairs program on flimsy evidence of corruption; the program-makers access him by pretending to be working on a positive story about him. The 24/7 program constructs and airs the resulting story—a mal-arranged jigsaw of facts and images portraying him as a villain. This triggers tragedy for himself and his family. Jeremy, the 24/7 executive producer responsible, uses charm, humour and misinformation to deflect blame but is eventually outed publicly for his shoddy, misleading and callous practice. At play’s end, however, he is brought back into the media fold to continue—unscathed—doing similar work into the future. In the foot-in-the-door segment a reporter and camera crew use the element of surprise to confront a member of the public with an accusation of customer mistreatment—capturing his damning flight response on camera. However, their research appears shoddy: they have the wrong person, he has not done what they accuse him of, and this fact emerges as they pursue him. The chase stops, the reporter apologises, the pursued person is too relieved to be angry and as the reporter and he begin to laugh about his fright the goof reel segment ends—with no sign a similar mistake will be avoided in the future. This smaller, shorter story within *Sand Dwellers* follows almost the same moral and story arc as the whole that unfolds over one and a half hours on stage.

McHale says a second function of the *abyme* is to provide a users’ “manual” (180) for readers/audiences to
understand how they are encountering the story's mega-world in contrast to their own. The science fiction traveller encountering another world even stranger than the science fiction world he or she inhabits throughout the text again provides a useful conceptual example. The reader or audience is guided by the character's experience of this secondary sci-fi world; this shows them how they should experience the meta-sci-fi world they must operate within if they are to understand the text they are seeing or reading. Similarly, the foot-in-the-door segment in *Sand Dwellers* tells audiences what world and moral code they will be dealing with in the overall piece—the world of current affairs television loaded with reckless ambition, a thirst for ratings, shoddy practices and ruthlessness dressed up as charm—and how to understand it.

Less clear is the way in which the goof reel segment of itself meets McHale's notion of a "map" function—to position the reader/audience in relation to the world in which the whole piece is set. The example McHale gives of a map *abyme* is what he calls a "system" of *mise en abyme* employed in *Don Quixote*: the ways in which parts of the novel report on or critique other parts, and most importantly the moment when Don Quixote realises a tale exists about Don Quixote. This intrusion of "story" and of the author's existence into reader awareness taps into McHale's view that *mise en abyme* is "fiction at play" (McHale 177). It also aligns with Bal's claim quoted by Ron (p419), that "Gide was interested primarily in the power of the narrating subject, a power which seems to increase when the subject doubles itself" (Bal 117). It is also the basis on which Ron notes (418) that Hutcheon (4) claims *abyme* to be "one of the major modes of textual narcissism". (Her allusion to this legend of excessive self-regard is made more pertinent because Narcissus fell in love with himself after encountering with his own *reflection*—emphasising again the reflexive qualities seen by many as integral to *abyme*. How *Sand Dwellers* might be seen to have its own system of *mise en abyme* shall be further discussed as more elements are touched upon. At this point, the intrusive author can be perceived at play within *Sand Dwellers* most strongly in the fictional *Media Eye* TV program which tells Jeremy his ruse as a charming media champion is over.

**Media Eye: “I remember you”**

(see The Sand Dwellers MEDIA EYE I remember you digital segment embedded in theatre script)

In a scene near the end of the play the character of Jeremy views this opening to a *Media Watch* style program "Media Eye", naming him as "blowfly champion shoddy journalist of the decade". In the Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre production I play the character of the "Media Eye" presenter. Casting the playwright in this role isn’t required by *Sand Dwellers* and this casting choice for the Bathurst production is only revealed in a small section of the program notes listing the multimedia cast. However, because I am the playwright and a former television journalist, my character’s words are given added meaning when she (or I) looks out from the television screen on stage and says: "Jeremy, if you're watching, I remember you. You're through." The words tell the audience that the character of the presenter has encountered Jeremy before—but the wider implication, especially with the playwright uttering these words, is that this theatre piece knows his type and the world-view that operates to sustain him. This *mise en abyme* has enabled me, being the playwright, to intrude into audience consciousness. My blurred role as playwright—with the tantalisingly vague implication that what is happening on stage is my story and I am performing autobiography—has implications for the relationship between audience, author and theatre text.

At several other points in *Sand Dwellers* I, the playwright, remind the audience of my existence, and hint at autobiography in the content, thus creating a reflexivity loop like that McHale identifies in *Don Quixote* and which Hutcheon says is at the heart of the true *mise en abyme*. In reality, I do not acknowledge *Sand Dwellers* as autobiographical—merely set in a world I know and containing characters like those found in that world. Nevertheless, the audience can be forgiven for thinking this is a revenge play; the character of Susan, thinking she is alone, near the end of Act One belts out a verse and chorus from Carly Simon's 1970s classic "You're So Vain". This song launched much speculation at the time of its release as to whom the song was about (not least because of the chorus line "...I bet you think this song is about you, don’t you, don’t you..."). This piece of song thus plays a *mise en abyme* function in *Sand Dwellers* by posing a query that comes out of the play: do a real Susan or Jeremy exist? If Jeremy is an actual person the
playwright’s insertion of the Simon song seems to be talking directly to him. The playwright seems to also speak directly to the real Jeremy (if there is one) when performing as the “Media Eye” presenter. The contrast between these different forms of address to Jeremy has further dramatic impact on the ways in which Sand Dwellers hints to the audience that, behind the fiction of this story, reality lurks.

These elements also make conscious the omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence of the playwright-author directing figures in a world she knows and has re-created (as required in Bal’s definition of abyme). This is alluded to in the second Act during Susan’s “send-off” from Sand Dwellers’ fictional TV network. When Jeremy takes over from his boss, John, to continue a farewell speech he uses the same retirement cliché John had used seconds before and then acknowledges it: “...Susan has decided to break our hearts and head off into the sunset—Oh John said that didn’t he—we must have the same script writer.” The character Jeremy jokes that he is speaking from a script—but the theatre audience knows that the actor playing Jeremy truly is saying words that have been written for him. As playwright I remind the audience, Don Quixote fashion, of my omniscient power to create this world and these people. This oblique reference to my playwright self began by accident: I had inadvertently given my characters the same clichéd phrase in their speeches. I decided, for fun (McHale’s “fiction at play”), to keep the repetition but added dialogue for the character to acknowledge “his” error. As playwright I experienced my inclusion of this line “we must have the same script writer” as a wave and “hello” to the audience: a way of being onstage with the actors without being physically cast to perform with them.

A more decisive mise en abyme in Susan’s narrative lies in the closing stages of Sand Dwellers when the characters discuss what Susan has done since leaving the 24/7 network: this former journalist has written a tell-all book critiquing the television journalism industry with Jeremy’s actions at the heart of her autobiographical tale. This occurs within Sand Dwellers, a stage-play written by a former journalist critiquing the television journalism industry and with the character Jeremy’s actions at the heart of her fictional tale. This emulates both Don Quixote’s reference to the tale of Don Quixote and Gide’s The Counterfeiters containing a fictional book “The Counterfeiters” being penned by a character within its pages. Arguably, it also exemplifies the author “narcissism” referred to by Hutcheon: I cannot quite let the audience’s awareness of me, the playwright, slip away.

Axolots and Evolution Metaphor: another abyme, another piece of the map

Kevin and Judi are pet axolotls of 24/7 cameraman and onstage character, Michael.

The play-script’s opening scene notes suggests they be represented by a fish tank, with an oxygen pump bubbling audibly in a way that alludes to Dark Ages alchemy. The creatures do not need to be seen—they are spoken to and referred to by the characters—including their potential one day in the future to metamorphose into salamanders: only when the chemical content of their tank water changes through human intervention and intention can this happen. The metaphoric purpose served by the axolotls is clear. (However, I intended them originally merely to illuminate Michael’s character: choosing creatures so apt to the play’s themes was accidental and unconscious). Their self-satisfied, comfortable, immature existence that won’t change without external intervention provides in a fish bowl a summary of what we see unfold outside it on stage: thus we experience another abyme. By happy creative accident their species are sand dwellers (and all that allusions to building on sand, as in the Old Testament, evoke), and thus their implicit and accidental occupation of the play’s title roles confirms their status as representations of the play’s whole. (Whether the audience themselves will make these interpretations consciously is not important, but the potential to make these or other interpretations is another element of the abyme experience within this theatre work.)

As well as being a self-contained mise en abyme, the axolotls are part of McHale’s notion of a system of mise en abyme (186) joined in this function alongside other abymes provided by digital elements in the stage-play and my oblique references as playwright to myself. Thus, as part of this system, they contribute to the map function described by McHale and which he says is exemplified in Don Quixote. The axolotls—and the metaphoric lens their life, habitat and destiny provide—are part of a system of abyme that positions the world of Sand Dwellers within a bigger world; at the same time this system helps the audience
position themselves in relation to the meta-world of the play and the world within which they and the play's world exist.

This system in *Sand Dwellers* that aligns with McHale’s map function includes elements less independently sufficient as *abyme*: audio visual digital material used as backdrops to onstage action (and the references made in dialogue to them that are also referenced non-visually), also contribute. Their appearance is foreshadowed in opening scenes as part of a TV series “Australian Gold” about “iconic” moments in the nation’s history (Nankervis). As playwright I drew links between stage action—as in an *abyme*—to that which had occurred in history and was being celebrated or commemorated by the fictional “Australian Gold” series. When the Gallipoli special was being “aired” the youngest characters on stage and in the play’s narrative were taking the fall for the errors, grand-standing and political machinations of senior 24/7 network decision-makers. When the fictional 1983 America’s Cup special was on air, Jeremy and John were agreeing on strategy to keep their big story as secret as possible within the network—as a “secret weapon” kept under wraps “like a winged keel”. Susan’s central speech at her “send-off” party—in front of the fictional commemorative “Australian Gold” program on Sydney’s 2000 Olympic Games—focused on the opening ceremony and the minutes Cathy Freeman stood poised, waiting patiently and then uncomfortably with torch arm in air, while the stair-lift meant to carry the lit cauldron to its position atop the stadium remained stuck by a mechanical fault. This *abyme*—provided in reality within Australia’s colonial history and the more recent wait for an apology about the Stolen Generation—positions for the audience that the play is really about larger themes than media practice and ethics. Thus all the frames of history around the stage and narrative action of *Sand Dwellers*, constituting the play scenes themselves as *abymes* inserted within those historical contexts, contribute to the system of *abyme* in *Sand Dwellers* that maps 21st century colonised Australia and the world stage within which the stage-play sits.

Practice within a practice within a practice: The current affairs package

(see Ben Brandon expose 24-7 package TV news format cutting and voiceover script)

Much of this paper’s discussion has focused on the *abyme* as an allusion, resemblance, reflection or miniature of the whole work within which it sits. However, in the digital multimedia environment it is easy to apply the other way in which *mise en abyme* is characterised: “abyssally”—an infinite descent into smaller and smaller reflections of the whole. *Sand Dwellers*’ current affairs packaged story—the fictional piece created in digital format and resembling television journalism conventions—sits at a layer within potentially abyssal layers of practice inherent in *Sand Dwellers*’ use of various media. This television package—produced (according to the fictional stage narrative) by the *Sand Dwellers’* 24/7 staff—is played in full to the theatre audience on a screen designed for their visual access (whilst at the same time it is being “aired” to millions of fictional television viewers).

A local network television journalist was cast as the reporter for this fictional television package. He used his television presentation skills steeped in journalistic practice for recording the “voice-over” and two pieces-to-camera used in the package. As a playwright, but also as a former journalist, I used my journalism practice to script the TV story, devise a shooting script, plan and script the visual elements and action required for the story, and to direct a camera artist to record all these elements in television news style. The real-life television journalist cast as a fictional TV reporter thus had his journalism practice embedded within his artistic acting practice. The playwright inserted TV news production practice (the structuring of the TV journalism package script) within her creative theatre writing practice (the *Sand Dwellers* stage play). But within the *abyme* of the interior TV news practice she inserted another layer: creative screen-writing practice. She scripted for actors, extras and camera crew the fictional action and dialogue that had to be shot (as if, but not really, by a genuine news crew) and then inserted into the cut TV current affairs package.

This creative writing practice within creative writing practice also occurred in the creation of the foot-in-the-door goof reel: the playwright created an industry-formatted film-script that was used by the crew and actors involved to shoot it, in practice, as a single-shot short film. In doing this, the creative industry
practice of drama short film-making was used to critique the creative industry practice of TV journalism within the creative industry practice of theatre.

Interestingly the short film camera artist capturing the action that became the "goof-reel" was simultaneously playing the acting role of a foot-in-the-door camera operator (including calling out as he fell to the ground—as scripted). Thus the person operating the camera occupied the creative practice position of film cameraman capturing point-of-view vision experienced by his on-camera character—thus occupying at the same time the other creative practice position of actor. Similar fusions of practice positions occur in other digital audio visual elements in the play—including when the playwright presents on "Media Eye". She is writer and actor but at the same time draws genuinely on her knowledge as a former news presenter to professionally apply this form of camera performance practice while also performing the acting role of a fictional someone who “remembers” Jeremy.

Returning to the abyssal—rather than the inter-media role—possibilities of Sand Dwellers' television current affairs package, it is worth noting that before opening night another layer of creative practice was created around the stage-play production: The play was the subject of news stories aired on two regional television stations, the Prime and WIN networks, serving Bathurst, NSW, Australia, the week Sand Dwellers opened. In this way we have authentic television journalism (Reeder) that is about a theatre piece that is about television journalism. This genuine journalism is further encased within another layer of practice and publication by its archiving on the WIN networks’ online site then copied onto a You-tube page 2 (Reeder) thus reframed within the borders provided by the internet web page where it now lives. Thus, the inner frames and the digital elements at the depth of theabyme-ic abyss are downshifted yet another layer as they are reproduced and relocated on yet another screen for another audience.

When mise en abyme was first conceived it was probably not envisaged that additional layers placed outside the layers surrounding an abyme could deepen its abyssal position after its creation and placement by the artist. But such is the abyssal potential of art in a digital world: the digital sphere can continue ad infinitum to place new viewing or access frames around what once would have been a piece bounded by an unchanging number of layers. So, the potential for inserting digital creations within pre-digital performance forms breathes fresh relevance into mise en abyme as an illustration of one way in which multimedia elements can serve contemporary theatre. At the same time and more generally, mise en abyme also illuminates the abyssal implications of the digital's infinite reproductive capacity to provide ongoing and unlimited relocations of created works after their original creators have left the scene.

However, the presence of multiple physical and practice frames is but one way in which Gide’s concept is a strikingly neat fit with this production of Sand Dwellers. What is even more important dramatically are the characteristics of author narcissism Hutcheon identified in mise en abyme and which play out in Sand Dwellers. This appropriateness arises because, while I claim the piece is not autobiographical, not my personal story, the micro-world of television journalism in which the story is set is a world I have lived in and occupied. Moreover, whether I was conscious at the time of writing and production or not, I realise now that it was important to me for the reception of the piece that the audience be reminded that this micro-world had been lived in by the playwright—that this world was indeed mine and that they should feel me beside them in the theatre or in front of them onstage.

Another result of Sand Dwellers’s multiple abymes incorporated into mise en scene and plot is that the audience experiences boundary blurrings: between the real and the fictional; between the actor-performers and the playwright; between the digital actors and their genuine roles as camera and sound recordist of their own on camera performances; and between theatre performance and that provided from elsewhere via screens. Without the action of abyme on audience reception of Sand Dwellers this piece would present as conventional dramatic theatre using naturalistic realism to lull an audience into effortless suspension of disbelief. Yes, the audience is allowed some comfort, some possibility that they are observing a fictional tale. But they are niggled by author intrusions which throw this into question. They are not subjected to didactic moral lessons of epic post-Brechtian theatre; but the reflexive action of mise en abyme in Sand Dwellers and the abyme-ic erosion of fourth wall conventions (via the persistent narcissism of an extraverted playwright)
model for the audience how they can question their own positions in their respective colonial meta-worlds.

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References


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Kay Nankervis worked for twenty years as a journalist for the ABC. She also trained and worked as an actor
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1. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qg_3ppZ59-E&list=UUAGbXmNKSLmBddcFkd70Lf&index=34](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qg_3ppZ59-E&list=UUAGbXmNKSLmBddcFkd70Lf&index=34)
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