



Theatre

The Question

Sue Rolfe shares her feelings about a theatre installation

In 1995 Oxford University Press published *On Blindness* – the letters between philosopher and broadcaster Bryan Magee and the late Martin Milligan, Head of Philosophy at the University of Leeds from 1959–1989. Milligan, who was blind almost from birth, was an active campaigner for the equal treatment and integration into society of blind people.

Magee maintained in his letters that blindness must affect people's ability to form concepts, interfering for example with the ability to *really know* a person. Milligan claimed that his lack of sight did not mean his concept of reality was different to Magee's. Against Magee he argued that a person with fewer senses may still know things which had not been in their own senses, through communication with people who had experienced these things through their senses. For instance, the association of *threat* and *danger* with the word *darkness* could be meaningfully shared by both sighted and blind people. Blind and sighted people share a common language which for Milligan has the same meaning for both, since meaning is not solely dependent on sensory perception.

The letters focus on Magee's questioning of Milligan's claim that *experiential* could be *propositional* knowledge. 'Propositional knowledge' is knowledge that a statement (proposition) is true. For example, I know that 'David Cameron is the present British Prime Minister.' 'Experiential knowledge' is whatever knowledge is directly present in experience. Imagine for examples experiencing the redness of a double decker bus, or the sound of C from a flute. Milligan maintained that since propositions can only have logical relations with other propositions, propositional knowledge cannot be derived from experiential knowledge, since 'purely' experiential knowledge, not formulated in terms of language, would be incompatible with it. Thus Milligan maintained that *all* knowing is *propositional*, that is, *knowing about* and *knowing that* something is true. For him so-called 'experiential knowledge' was just another kind of propositional knowledge. Magee countered with strong rhetoric that such an

assertion was preposterous, questioning the type of knowledge an intellect dulled by drink or drugs might deliver – a self-deluding argument, since who can say that someone even on heroin has *no knowledge*?

The dialogues made little progress as Magee could get no agreement from Milligan on what constituted propositional knowledge. Milligan for his part commented on the ambiguity of the word 'experience', touching on Russell's idea of it sometimes equalling knowledge by acquaintance.

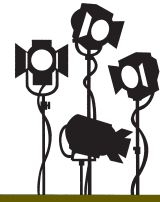
Magee, a well-known exponent of Karl Popper, firmly rejected empiricist stances and the later Wittgenstein's thoughts on knowledge, although at one point in the exchange he did proffer Wittgenstein's remark that "to be able to see on both sides you have to 'think' on both sides of its limits" Things got rather out of hand when Milligan tried to convince Magee that it was perfectly possible for a blind person to play snooker. But *do* blind-from-birth and sighted people really have the same concept of the world?

Small Worlds

Maria Oshodi, Artistic Director of Extant, Britain's only company for visually-impaired theatre professionals, has spent the last ten years experimenting with techniques to give blind and sighted people as similar an experience of theatre as possible. Her stimulating and comic *Effing & Blinding! Cabaret*, performed in complete darkness last year, demonstrated that blind actors have an acute grasp of spatial awareness which enables them to deliver immersive theatre that can be enjoyed by all.

Oshodi's latest venture, *The Question*, was partly instigated by the Magee/Milligan dialogues, as well as by ideas from physicists Kent Cullers and Richard Feynman, and writers Kim Stanley Robinson and Simon Hayhoe. This 'research project' was presented at Battersea Arts Centre, South London, June 14–19, and was funded by the Technology Strategy Board. It aimed to explore the artistic and commercial applications of tactile feedback technology using *haptics*. Haptic technology interfaces





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devote all my attention to the riveting dialogue. My perfunctory tactile exploration had revealed a boxing glove, a bell, and ropes, as well as a punch bag which knocked me on the head from time to time as I pursued my circular journey. This physical environment was particularly apt for the Milligan/Magee debates. But far from the project delivering a similar experience of the world for blind and sighted participants, it rather underlined for me the impossibility of such a thing.

Larger Worlds

'Extant', meaning 'they exist', is a highly appropriate name for Oshodi's theatre company. It indicates a Kantianesque ontology where blind people exist independently of others' experience of them. That is to say, Extant do not need to be *seen* to *exist*. The everyday experience of blind people does reflect a little of the coming into and going out of existence: people's voices come and go, indicating presence or absence.

As well as delivering immersive theatre, *The Question* also provided interactive theatre. Interactivity is one of the fastest growing trends in theatre, driven by our changing relationship with technology. Haptics is the latest in a fashion for the audience being challenged to interact in site-specific situations and provide much if not all of the performance factor.

Having amassed considerable feedback from participants for this project, Extant are now planning to develop an immersive theatre piece using haptic devices on a grander scale. A large warehouse space has been mentioned. I have every faith in haptics, and I am determined that next time I will not be marooned in one of Extant's corners like a buzzing fly – which seems a particularly Wittgensteinian concept with which to end.

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Sue Rolfe studied Philosophy at Leeds under Martin Milligan and Peter Geach. She's worked in theatre for thirty years, including at the Royal Court with Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Lindsay Anderson. She recently produced a site-specific dramatisation of Arnold Bennett's Buried Alive.



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with the user through the sense of touch (*haptic* = touch).

The Question followed the thoughts of a blind scientist struggling with scientific, philosophical and cultural questions concerning the relationship between sensory perception and knowledge. Entering into a dark space, both sighted and blind audience members were equipped with a set of wireless headphones and a 'Haptic Lotus' (see picture). This robotic device strapped to one hand was programmed as a navigational aid, to guide the user to four installation zones within the theatre. The device's lotus flowers blossomed more the nearer the user came to each zone, and closed again as the user moved away. Participants could then make a tactile exploration of each zone's set whilst listening to a recorded soundtrack. *The Question* vividly audially dramatised Milligan and Magee's argument about the status of sensory perception through a mix of voices, music and sound effects, including birdsong, cries of newborn babies, footsteps, heartbeats and traffic. The whole provided an aural level playing field where blind and sighted people could have not just a blind person's experience of the physical world, but simultaneously an aesthetic dreamlike impression of the inner landscape of the mind and its chattering dialogue with itself.

The soundtrack of *The Question's* philosophical zone certainly did justice to Schopenhauer's idea that a particular form of knowledge beyond words he called

'knowledge of the sublime' is best articulated by art – or as the young Wittgenstein averred, "significance can be presented but not stated." Here the voices of Milligan and Magee mixed in a heady swirl of interjections from Isaac Newton and John Locke. Locke, the first of the British empiricists, maintained that our senses provided the source of all our ideas and knowledge, dividing our ideas into *simple ideas of sense* and *complex ideas of reflection*. An added Socratic layer of dramatic intrigue was achieved by an actor wandering through the space and questioning everybody.

Whilst the current haptic device, designed by humanoid technology engineer Adam Spiers, is an excellent step in the direction of delivering a similar theatrical experience to both blind and sighted participants, I have a sneaking suspicion that blind participants may have gained more from the experience than I. I have to confess finding myself marooned in the philosophy zone rather like a fly buzzing against a window pane. Whilst my reasoning told me that there must be a large space to explore, my senses told me I was confined in a tiny black cubicle – probably because I was facing a black-draped wall to which I kept returning, as the Haptic Lotus chattered away to me, opening and closing its petals. I was stuck like a bumper car at the fair.

However, all was not lost, because having already proved my inadequacy in moving and listening at the same time, being stuck in the philosophy zone, I was able to