

Pic Poc Poe – The Rite of Exit.

7.30 pm Friday 13th February 2004

CONICAL

Performers – Jason Maling and Torie Nimmervoll

Sound Design – Finn Robertson

Edgar Allen Poe's short story "Masque of the Red Death" was first published in 1842. In the story a fatal disease ravages a fictitious land ruled by an extravagant prince. The Prince gathers a thousand of his friends and seals them in a large abbey where they plan to escape the onslaught of the disease. During their isolation the Prince holds a lavish masquerade ball and the disease enters disguised as a costumed guest. Everybody dies. The text is baroque and deeply atmospheric and the tale is narrated in a manner that accentuates its quality of myth or fairytale.

Poe argued that allegory was an inferior literary form because it was designed to evoke interest in both the narrative and the abstract ideas for which the narrative stands. Allegory distracted the reader from the "singleness of effect" which he valued most in literature. Masque of the Red Death develops a powerful tension between the directness and inevitability of the narrative and its crafted "effect".

I have long been interested in a similar tension that occurs between process and presentation, particularly as it is manifested through religious rituals and folk games. A "player" may lose themselves in the rules or structure of an activity and become oblivious to a presented narrative. Conversely a performer may play with an exterior presentation in mind and neglect the mechanics of the game. These issues present a curious compositional problem for the artist, a duality for the "player", and an unstable role for the audience.

I began working on Pic Poc Poe in London during 1997, at the time I was researching old English religious rituals and the way in which memory and repetition moulds and abstracts the form of a ritual through time. What often begins as a significant social event can evolve into a condensed "effect" expressed through the form of a children's rhyme or a rite such as the Maypole festival.

Pic Poc Poe is a rite where the "effect" is the tension between a story read, a story played and a story remembered. It exploits various literary images embedded in Poe's text, primarily the central theme of exit or inevitable death and transforms these into a series of objects and rules for a directional stepping game.

The text has been split into eight sections and stamped onto a series of double-sided leather tiles that are organized in a similar way to Dominoes. The two players move by stepping onto the tiles one at a time and placing each subsequent tile according to colour and the physical orientation of the text. Every time a player steps onto a new tile the text on that tile must be recited. How the text is recited is up to the player.

The winner is the first person to exit the room or defined playing space.

The rules are complex enough to seem baffling to an unfamiliar audience. Here are a few clues:

The length of the Rite is dependant on the skill of the players and the size of the room.

The beating or clap at the end of a recital is the signal for the other player to begin their next turn.

Tiles with black sections are wild cards. The black sections have no text printed on them and constitute a pause in both the story and play.

Tiles with black sections can be picked up and retained creating an interruption in a path.

There is one tile that operates as a joker, this tile is all black.

What the audience experiences of the text is dependent on whether the novices choose to play externally (whereby their tile decisions are based more on the performance of a section of story) or internally, (whereby decisions are based on tactical directness of movement). It is quite possible for a clever novice to use only a small number of unlinked narrative sections to exit the room. Players may also become stranded or trapped due to bad judgment or clever opposing play.

Pic Poc Poe was first performed in London at the Slade School of Art in 1997. In the summer of 1998 it was toured through ten ruined abbeys in Britain as a series of performances in collaboration with English Heritage. These performances were in daylight and often outdoors. The absurd association of crumbling gothic structures, drizzling rain and American tourists in leisure suits added a very surreal twist to games that sometimes spanned several hours.

This rather auspicious black Friday rite is the first time Pic Poc Poe has been performed in six years. Torie and myself have never played our way out of Conical so we cannot give you a clear time length. A lot depends on the tiles we end up with and how we chose to play them. If things go on too long for you, please don't feel you have to stay until we exit.

Many thanks to Lisa Reynolds for her sewing skills, Justine Henry for her cross painting skills and to Finn for his wonderful sound design. Huge thanks to my wife and part time dramaturg Becca and to Torie my co-performer for her continued commitment and talent.

Jason Maling 2004