Remembering Composition (The Book):
A DVD Production

Bump Halbritter and Todd Taylor

On Broadway, the term "book," as a noun, means script. For musicals, "the book" is the dialogue. "Remembering Composition" began, conceptually, as a Broadway production titled "New Media Convention Live," a featured session at the 2003 Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention, held in the New York Hilton.

Of course, it's a stretch to call a conference presentation a Broadway production, although one of our major premises was to make "New Media Convention Live" as responsive to location as imaginable (in this case the Theater District). Leading up to the project, we were feeling particularly frustrated with the expectations of traditional conference presentations. In a convention of rhetoricians, in which the topic almost always touches on the importance of audience awareness, we have all too frequently endured presentations that fail to respond to the exigencies and contexts of a live room. "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture," Elvis Costello once said (Scott). Reading aloud an essay written for print to a crowd of communication specialists amounts to a similar non sequitur. And, since our topic was new media, the urgency to avoid non sequitur was compounded because print-based arguments and presentations on new media often seemed to us like dancing about architecture. We had in mind something highly experimental, and the conference chair, Kathleen Yancey, was generous enough to give us license, money, and a

venue for our outlandish proposal leveraged on three words: "loud and fast." Here's the program description:

Those who attend this conference and sessions like this one must first lug luggage across borders. They often submit to searches and always invest their increasingly valuable time and resources. "New Convention Media Live" aims to honor the conference experience and reward audience member-participants by offering them something special, local, of-the-moment—something irreproducible that will happen only once, in New York, at this conference. Part theater, part rave, part performance art, part concert, part film, part revival, part narration, part audience participation, "New Convention Media Live" experiments against the conventions of convention sessions. Todd Taylor and Scott Halbritter direct this event with the help of projectors and screens, musicians and singers, computers and media, unconventional seating and participation, commentary from dozens of scholars and teachers, and contributions from a host of collaborators and artists—all bound together in a structure of movements and acts. Todd and Scott offer a unique experience of sound, motion, light, and word that challenges the ways we typically approach text, papers, books, talks, panels, writing, communication, composition, and ourselves. This session encourages conference goers to rethink the community of the annual convention itself so that we might also transform our classrooms in similar ways. You are invited to participate. (96)

So, we packed up a white rental van full of audio visual equipment, and drove from North Carolina to New York City. We had fourteen projection screens, six projectors, two laptops, two DVD players, two guitars, a mixing console, two video cameras, a half-dozen mics, and miles of cable. In New York, we added a keyboard, an overpowered sound system, a keyboardist (Joe Hardin), and a three-piece horn section. Bump sang and played guitar live, accompanied by the ensemble that met and rehearsed for the first time ninety minutes before the gig. Todd hid behind screens and curtains, pulling levers and pushing buttons like a charlatan Oz. We had in mind an over-the-top multimedia spectacle that perhaps
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sidled up to hubris but hopefully never quite crossed into that territory. Anne Wysoki converted the rotunda lobby into a breathtaking installation of new media student and faculty projects. Our thinking was that conference attendance is such an increasingly significant and expensive investment, particularly in New York City, that we wanted to try our best to give the audience their money’s worth, so to speak. To that end, we sought an intentionally disposable product that, at least initially, had no future beyond the session itself. You had to be there, or you missed it. And, to a certain extent, that’s still true: launching a conference presentation with live horns probably happens only once in a lifetime.

To our sincere and sleep-deprived surprise, it all somehow came together. The audience was kind and complementary, but the conversation quickly turned to “What’s next?” We didn’t know. It took three years, JAC, and Lynn Worsham to help us answer that question.

“Remembering Composition” is a significantly reworked version of the film elements at the center of “New Media Convention Live.” The core of both projects is a set of documentary interviews that explore an array of perspectives on new media in composition studies. We have been greatly influenced by the collection of scholarly interviews that JAC has published since the 1980s. So, when we approached the awkward prospect of fitting the square peg of the live show into the round hole of more conventional scholarly publication, JAC seemed a perfect fit. We are extremely grateful to Lynn Worsham and the anonymous reviewers at JAC who nurtured the (re)making of “Remembering Composition.” We hesitate, at this point, to share much of our thoughts on the final cut for fear of prejudice. Even a “scholarly” film seems perhaps to benefit more from poetic inference than explicit exposition. Even so, we should probably answer four practical questions from the early readers.

Q: Why did it take three years to revise the film for publication?
A: Copyright.
The guidelines for use of protected material in a live, non-commercial performance venue are vastly different than those for publication. Making copies changes everything. We were extremely naive in thinking originally that, if we were persistent enough, we would eventually receive gratis permission to use some materials in a published version. After two years, the studios answered our persistence. Even though many of our requests should have been considered fair-use for critical and scholarly purposes, the going rate charged by the big studios was $1000 for every ten seconds of material. In his book, *Free Culture*, Lawrence Lessig makes a compelling argument that United States' copyright law wrongly criminalizes the growing and thriving media sampling/remix culture of the post-baby-boom generation. Through digital media, a new generation of media producers has begun to emerge from beneath the shadows of decades of media consumers, and digital remix/sampling for *critical, non-commercial purposes* is a key to that empowerment. Yet, Lessig documents how small, independent critics and artists are essentially rendered guilty until proven innocent due to laws that overreact to media piracy. Corporately backed, late-night comedy shows can fully exercise the fair-use clause for satirical purposes, but you and I might risk our homes if we lack the lawyers required to defend ourselves from suits.

"Remembering Composition" had to make lemonade from the lemon that is current copyright law. The good news is that the challenge reinvigorated the project in a couple of ways. The final cut does contain material that we used with permission from three sources. The first two sources are both nationally prominent, independent artists who retain copyright of their own material and thus were responsive and principled enough to grant permission. Jem Cohen personally gave permission to use his wonderful non-narrative video work, and ani di franco's self-owned label allowed us to use two of her songs. The Prelinger Archive, which we discovered through Creative Commons, contains a large and fascinating collection of public-domain films that we remixed in the opening montage. So, to all of the media execs and Supreme Court Justices reading this article: take our advice, liven up, and follow
the lead of independent artists and public domain archives by encouraging fair-use of your products. Ultimately, copyright restriction also pushed us to expand our repertoire as composers (and our perspectives on composition) as we created an original score, a theme song, and conceptual footage to mortar together again the pieces of the original production left in disarray from the excision of big-studio material.

Q: How were the interview subjects selected?
A: Geographically.

Our first thought was to balance the list of interviews between folks who tended to be pro-technology with more mainstream figures who did not seem to have a particular investment in digital issues. We expected that half of the interviews would find that new media work is key to composition's future, while the other half would argue that technology might distract us from our core focus. But, even more so, we hoped that a diversity of perspectives would generate a polyphonic-mosaic “voice” of sorts that would defy our initial assumptions. Our second thought was logistical: how to interview two dozen folks within two weeks, which eventually compressed to seven days? Todd flew from North Carolina to Atlanta to Pennsylvania and then drove west to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, interviewing two or three people per day for five days in a row. Bump interviewed four folks in the Carolinas; Sid Dobrin interviewed three in Florida. Cindy Selfe filmed herself. We added Victor Vitanza and Andrea Lunsford after the 2003 presentation, because we wished they were on the original geographic circuit and because we had a camera handy when we stumbled into them later.

Q: How was the live, three-dimensional performance (re)fabricated into a film on DVD?
A: It wasn’t.

On the one hand, the original performance had some dynamic elements that were worth trying to recapture. The 2003 film was
projected on a left-oriented screen while complementary or antagonistic words were projected on the right. Instead of a vertical split, "Remembering Composition" has a separate layer for the "text messages" that float on top of the film. Like the original, the published film has interstices that organize the interview clips and disrupt the talking-head monotony—although all of the "Remembering" interstices are new and copyright friendly. The original opened with a montage and closed with a sample of student work, both of which had copyright issues in terms of music and image; so, those had to be completely rebuilt from scratch. On the other hand, the entire project had to be reshaped and re-edited for DVD and could never approximate the visceral, other-worldly experience of sitting in the dark, amid four-hundred oddly angled chairs, fourteen screens, very loud speakers, and real brass. We hoped to compensate for the sensuality of the live show with a more cerebral treatment on DVD that could be paused, rewound, and studied. For example, the new theme song, "Remember to Forget about Tomorrow," is more quiet, mid-tempo, and lyrically relevant than the opening song used in live rendition. It bares rewinding and dissection, especially in terms of the often Freudian or patriarchal inferences between the images and the lyrics, whereas the live opening had to be simple and literal enough to grasp as it raced by amid much distraction.

Q: If you had to start this project all over again, what would you change?
A: Nothing, because every step and misstep was incredibly valuable.

The years of struggle to re-create a permanent artifact from the original, ephemeral edition might suggest that it would have been better to imagine a dual purpose from the start. But we truly lacked an informed sense of what a longterm version might look like until well after we had worked through the frenzy of the first draft. Like a Buddhist sand sculpture, the disposability of the first production generated a wonderful, present, communal moment—much of that experience was about being there, together. We’re even oddly
proud of the cheap microphones we had back then, because they have a quaint, old-school-documentary, Ed-Morrow look and grainy sound. We can’t imagine the final project without going through the initial steps.

Furthermore, the enterprise was leveraged on all sorts of tensions that we hoped to explore productively: print versus new media, alphabetic text versus film, traditional genres versus emerging modes, monologue versus polyphony, still versus animation, live versus DVD—trying to imagine what a scholarly film might look like with no apparent models. We intended to revel in the margins of scholarship, which are, of course, nonetheless always defined in their relations to the center. In other words, wrestling with the paradox of trying to defy convention while avoiding eccentricity was potent fuel. These very sentences exemplify such tension. Lynn, Bump, and Todd instinctually agreed that there needed to be a traditionally formatted print companion (that you are reading) to the “eccentric” but authentic primary text, because we (including, apparently, you, the reader) all recognized that it might be too easy for the film to get lost or dissociated from the bound, paper version of JAC (and vice versa). Hence, the need for this “book” about the film.

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Works Cited

