**Borderland Project Research and Development**

**Feedback from audience**

I thought the piece at Bath Spa was excellently executed - that the concentration was brilliant and sustained.  I loved the German Lieder; it seemed to make the piece transcendental at that point. It was all very high quality.

**Public**

It was a very interesting performance and full of so many conflicting perspectives. Ugliness and beauty, nightmarish and serene, turmoil and calm, brutal and sensual and I thought your input was wonderful. The German worked really well, but not at all in the way I expected it to. It was gentle and sympathetic. The cello was Lovely.

I don't pretend to understand it all and am sure there will have been a lot of aspects and imagery that I missed, but that said I found it haunting and evocative.

**Public**

Just wanted to say how visually alluring Borderlands was in regards to the set and the costumes, using nightdresses and delicate material really showed off the women's vulnerability - the use of live music perfectly in sync with the mood and movements/but sometimes contrasting was really powerful.
The pace and dynamic of the piece was incredible. It was organic but unpredictable.
During the whole piece I felt as though I was being suspended, hanging on by a thread, I felt incredibly tense but floaty at the same time. It was quite a surreal experience. The visual and physical representation of a fractured mental state was evident and clear.
The fragmented speech indicating individual experiences was powerful and emotive.
I was sometimes a little confused in regards to how the dresses connected. Three of the girls removed a dress and they were all in blue under garments, I thought perhaps it was to represent how they were all becoming the same person, but as the piece progressed, I realised this wasn't the case. I think it would help from an audience perspective to make more or of the relationships between the women.
I think this was shown the strongest when the paper dress was being soaked in water. It was incredibly empathetic

**Drama Student**

The first work-in-progress viewing of Borderland - Red Room Productions – was a fascinating piece of ensemble work. It was an intensely engaging 70mins experience. The audience were drawn into a closed world, a defined space where hanging drapes of different thicknesses floated at irregular heights. Each drape offered a different degree of clarity so that as the actors moved around the space some were seen as though through a veil, a clouded vision separating the women and the world of the audience.  Amongst the drapes five white dresses hung lifelessly at different levels. In contrast, an enticing red dress lay spread out luxuriously on the floor ready for each for the five women to try on and, eventually, reject.

The sound scape, at times loud and insistent, at moments ethereal and other- worldly, reflected the change of mood of the five women.  Vocal sounds, German text even the soaring notes of a finger on glass reflected the anger, frustration, longing and fatigue of the women. However, there was always a return to the low notes of the cello which provided an undercurrent throughout the piece.

Borderland was an excellent example of the benefit to be gained through the devising process.  The integrity of the research was apparent from the way each of the elements worked to enhance the experience of the audience. Clearly, the whole company had a depth of understanding of the material which was the starting point for the project which gave them the freedom to explore women and mental health.

Borderland chose two specific examples of women suffering mental illness as inspiration to explore the theme more widely. The Yellow Wallpaper is a short story in which a fictional woman is incarcerated in a hallucinatory room. There were literary references throughout Borderland, for instance, Bertha Mason with the red dress and the tearing of a flimsy veil, the frustration and anger expressed in The Yellow Wallpaper even Kath’s fragile mental state during her pregnancy in Wuthering Heights. There was poignant use of nursery rhymes and childlike play suggesting the significance of motherhood and the mother/daughter relationship to the women. Throughout the piece the women displayed a sense of isolation and longing.

The photographer, Francesca Woodman produced evocative, painful images frequently using herself as the subject. The influence of her unsettling and challenging images was clear in the angular movement and the painful poses of the five women on the stage. However, perhaps there is more to be done here with this aspect of the work. The direction of the next stage of the project might be to develop this further.

**Actor and Director**

I would like to congratulate you on your production of Borderland; I was compelled and drawn in from the beginning to the end. The clarity of the actresses to portray specific thoughts through movement alone was so clear and strong.

Also, the visual aspect of using the dresses as part of the set as well as the performers interacting with the set to tell the story and eventually wearing the dresses was a great way of bringing the concept of 'the yellow wallpaper' to life.

Furthermore, the use of sound throughout the production was striking and really created a sombre atmosphere. The dissonance created through the combination of the violin, singing and use of chairs scraping along the floor was chilling yet created a powerful atmosphere, reflecting the mental condition of those women.

One area perhaps to consider if the project is developed further would be to make the dramaturgy clearer. The background to the work is a truly fantastic story and how you captured various stimulus and background material from different sources made the performance incredibly rich. A clearer through line might aid an audience with no prior knowledge or awareness to that depth of work you discovered and researched, to grasp the story more.

**Senior Lecturer**

Red Room Production’s *Borderland* was a poetic, image driven hybrid performance experience that successfully used an ensemble to deliver the themes of the piece.

The research that had gone into the piece was exceptionally clear in establishing the theatrical context/world that the piece inhabited (and maintained by the commitment of the ensemble); this created clear imagery that was able to discuss a delicate theme that is normally dealt with in a condescending/cliché manner within theatre. These strong images of the internalisation of mental health hit really hard for me as an audience member. The piece successfully communicated the internal drowning and continuing, seemingly never-ending thought process experienced by people with mental health problems; in a way that a conventional theatrical dialog wouldn’t have been able to do so. This instantly made me engage with the piece more as it was clear that the creators understood the complexity of the subject matter, they were dealing with respected it and this almost extended the sense of complicity from within the ensemble, to also include the audience. I feel that this depth of research would have been felt by all members of the audience engaged in this work, regardless of their personal experience with the subject matter. The imagery communicated this internal suffering clearly and more powerfully than standalone text through the use of ensemble, set, lighting, props and additional repeated text. Further to this the almost painful to listen score really forced the audience themselves to feel, to some extent, the pain that the subject matter being presented can cause.

Three moments of the piece in particular really stood out: the face against the sheet, the running and the stepping on the tiles. Indeed, the image of the face pressed against the sheet woke me up in the middle of the night, it was so powerful. The idea of a mental health disability completely destroying the person’s ability to feel like a person with an identity that they are proud of was clearly brought to life in a way that I have never been able to explain to a psychiatrist. This had been developed further as well by the person’s desperation to break through the soft material hanging from the rig. From a spectator’s perspective it looks so simple for the person to walk through the cloth and be the human they are, but something – unknown and invisible to the spectator was preventing the representation from being able to do this. Interestingly, at no point did the piece directly identify as being about a specific mental health condition or indeed mental health at all; it was just clear as an audience member that there was something unseen that made these people involuntarily engage with the world in the way they did. This made the piece relevant to all areas of mental health and the fluidity of the conditions, symptoms and the way this can make people feel.

The constant running with the accompanying text of ‘catch me’ being repeated was startling and moved interestingly away from other more cliché phrases that theatre can attempt to explore through the general theme of mental health. The genuine physical exhaustion of the performer was compelling to watch and this built the audience’s frustration with the characters just watching her on stage. The audience were cleverly put in a position of being unable to help whilst also getting frustrated and confused as to why the people that could help her wouldn’t. This interestingly (and uncomfortably) mirrored society’s current viewpoint of mental health as something that is not serious or should be talked about.

The stepping on the tiles for me represented clearly people offering support but also how unsteady this can still feel to someone with mental health, again this image was more powerful than text and was more engaging for an audience to watch than for a character in a piece to try and explain through dialog alone. The poetic nature of these images however, enabled audience members to identify with the images in their own specific way.

I feel that *Borderland*’s use of imagery clearly communicated delicate themes in a theatrical world that was compelling for an audience to watch. This had clearly been well backed up by research and then developed by a committed ensemble that clearly engaged with the work.

**Drama Student**

"It was a very immersive experience and I didn't find my mind wondering. The interplay between the characters suggested a strong bond and a deep knowing of each other's distressing realities. The use of music and props created meaningful symbolism but left room for plenty of personal interpretation. I came away with a sense of the experience that accompanies mental illness and a greater respect for those living in its clutches".

**Drama Student**

I found Borderland really moving, it was so helpful to have an insight into women's experiences of mental illness and it is definitely something about which I think awareness needs to be raised. Hopefully this will change the ways in which we respond to women's mental health. That said, it wasn't easy to watch and I felt confronted by issues that I might otherwise have avoided. The ways in which the actors expressed different women's experiences, both common and diverse, were really powerful. I loved the use of music too and the repetition of different phrases by the actors.

**Audience member**

It was an intensely immersive, multifaceted and layered experience.

Particularly absorbing were the interactions between the performers and the scenography. Far from being decorative, the spatial design was beautifully and sensitively fundamental to the narrative. The music too, was fully integrated.

Despite being a harrowing theme, there was a sensitive flow throughout in the structure of the piece and the relationships between the performers. It was wonderful to see such a range of women, all of who were incredibly committed and focused.

**Audience member**

I found it to be a mesmerising and evocative piece of theatre that defied literal interpretation but will have a lasting resonance in my memory. Accomplished physical performance; haunting musical accompaniment and a cinematic set, costume and lighting design - great stuff!

**Audience member**

Watching Borderland, you get a sense that you are watching real lives and struggles being portrayed in a physical montage. After a few moments you forget that these are actors and focus purely on the emotions being evoked within. Saying this, you walk away wanting more. You know there is more to the story to be told, and so you can't help but surf the world's wonderful web for more of the true raw emotions behind mental illness. In this way Borderland goes beyond what you see on stage.

**Drama Student**

I thought it was brilliant. I was even smiling at some points due to how intense it was and how it made me feel. Loved the set, lights and especially the sound!

**Theatre Technology Student**

Borderland’s research and development was a thoughtful, delicate piece of work. The relationship between the performers and the space successfully evoked a strong sense of claustrophobia. Despite very few words the use of live sound and breath, the raw images and different rhythms allowed me a genuine emotional connection. The link with the Yellow wallpaper was very clear. To develop I would be interested to see  the company explore more contemporary examples of women's experiences of mental health alongside the historical ones.   I would be very interested to see how Mary and her team develop this piece.

**Senior Lecturer**

Thank you too, for your beautiful work!

**Events Manager**

**Twitter responses**

Congratulations Red Room Productions [@MaryBSteadman](https://twitter.com/MaryBSteadman) on Borderland. Creative, Intense and moving. Amazing Set, Lights & Music too!

Currently at [@bathspalive](https://twitter.com/bathspalive) #BDRLND a new project by [@MaryBSteadman](https://twitter.com/MaryBSteadman). Further artwork at [@Studio44AD](https://twitter.com/Studio44AD). A fantastic thought-provoking piece.

The story was beautifully painted. I was captivated by your work, as always [@MaryBSteadman](https://twitter.com/MaryBSteadman) A massive well done to all behind [#BDRLND](https://twitter.com/hashtag/Borderland?src=hash)