



Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprs20

Josephine

Michelle Hannah

To cite this article: Michelle Hannah (2024) Josephine, Performance Research, 29:7, 138-141, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2024.2569247](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2569247)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2024.2569247>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 27 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 88



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

There was an ushering into a basement of concrete corridors after I was greeted in the reception area of the Parapsychology Department by an unnamed PhD student. A slightly dull office room had been set up, with a recliner, side table, chair, desk, and old PC in the corner, all revealed as she gestured for me to sit. There was not much chat, just a few awkward pleasantries about the train, the weather and what exactly this study¹ would entail. Consent forms were given, water bottles offered and placed on the table, in case participants took a funny turn. I had entered a hallowed set of conduits.

Once I sat and adjusted the slightly imposing leather armchair, I was adorned in the required costume of large, red-tinted glasses and a noise-cancelling headset – sensory academic deprivation. At first, nothing happened; it was a prolonged intermission. What initially presented as a simple somatic meditation – counting, deep vagus nerve breathing, white noise – quickly and suddenly shifted into otherness.

A haunted actor took over.

At first, all I could comprehend was a bright red stage light above a door. Then, red unfolded over me as the department's office faded, subsiding into a backstage of unknowns. I had slipped into a scarlet gap, a non-space of senses. Neither close nor far, just there. The sensation of floating and breathing was becoming overwhelming. I might panic, I thought, but I was abruptly lifted upwards, like a marionette on strings. No longer contained within office walls, no longer in situ with Edinburgh, I was crossing a boundary into a grey Scottish sky. It was bliss.

Through parting clouds below me, I saw a red car come into view, speeding and twisting on a winding road that hugged a steep, grassy terrain. A faceless driver was the sole occupant. In a moment's eye, I was thrown into its passenger seat, heading towards a small burn² that sat below the single country road we now sped along. It seemed like a familiar landscape, one I had visited before, I thought, as a child or in an embodied future. I tried to turn my head to see the dark driver, but a fifth wall formed like condensation between us. They remained a silent petrol guide, and I never saw their face.

I was absorbed through its red passenger door. The car disappeared as soon as it came, taking the driver with it. I now stood alone at the bottom of a hill, looking towards a small cottage in front of me. The air was licked by haze and film, with a sprinkling of static from outside. I could make out that the single-storey building was old, dirty white stone, with an indistinct brown slate roof. Two unkempt windows,

¹ The Ganzfeld experiment (from the German words for 'entire' and 'field') is an assessment used by parapsychologists that they contend can test for extrasensory perception (ESP) or telepathy through a state of sensory deprivation.

² A burn is a kind of watercourse. The term applies to a large stream or a small river.

paned in dark glass on either side, revealed nothing. I knew this was the Highlands. I wanted a glimpse inside. Without footsteps or the slightest weight, I drifted like a backdrop slowly towards its thick, imposing wooden door. Every turn of my body was in a different timeframe, a movement of atoms rather than muscle. Unseen forces choreographed immaterial bone.

My hand, without instruction, clasped a solid round handle as I attempted to cross a stony threshold. It did not budge. I needed to get inside. Static started to swell, threatened by my inquisitive gesture. I moved and traced the large white stones of its walls, drifting around corners to the back of the cottage, the hill staring down at its facade.

Looking up towards the slope, I noticed dust gathering as an earthy mass of smoke appeared on the hilltop. One by one, spikes formed – a clink of steel, then humans in hoods and cloaks. Foreboding was the word. They stood as one impenetrable force, looking through my transparent self at the cottage. The air tasted of dread.

The back of the cottage mirrored the front, and again I found myself clasping a metal handle. I felt panic rising. The rust tore my skin, and a sensation of cold metal travelled up my veins, like the first touch of a new filling. I shifted through these thoughts and opened my eyes – I was in the midst of the cottage. The door swung shut behind me. What presented was a dim interior, dusty in a dank grey light that poured in. Two adjoining rooms met: the front held a small single wooden bed covered in wool, hard against a wall with nothing else; the back, where I stood, contained a burned white stone kitchen, a wooden sideboard with crumbling shelves, a few pots and glasses, dried flowers, animal skins, and two chairs around a large thick round wooden table.

The table. That was in front of me. I could see that the wood had been carved into, a large curving symbol with three lines sliced on its surface like a disturbed alphabet, not by hands or nails but by blade. I sensed the importance of that esoteric gesture. Protection or infliction. I pressed a hand firmly to absorb its symbolic grain. It was a score I wanted to follow.

I sensed a slight movement.

Something offstage right in the back room against the wall – a corner of my eye twitched towards it. There was a presence made of dark cloth, same height, same shape, draped in a black arisaid³ to the ground. I did not move; they stood out of sight on purpose, part wraith, part obscure understudy

³ An arisaid is a draped garment historically worn in Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and probably earlier) as part of traditional female Highland dress.

JOSEPHINE

awaiting a call. It was absorbing me, both paused in an arcane tableau vivant.

Letters came to a possessed throat ... a word ... J O S E P H I N E. I said this out loud, and the student scribbled it down, as I repeated it insistently. With a slight shift of heads, I made eye contact. Her face cracked with paleness – not clear enough for clarity, but an image made in shaded renders. We did not look away. I saw no age or grey hair, only cloth, a hood covering sins. I traced her skin into memory: chalky gravel, brittle, set around deep onyx eyes and sunken scarred cheeks.

The light had dimmed outside, and a new midnight sky unveiled the humans with fire at the top of the hill. A red doom reigned. They started to charge towards the cottage. We both, in shades of other, turned from our gaze to this swell of hatred descending. There was a heightened sense of urgency to flee. It was a hunt. J O S E P H I N E shifted from the corner in one movement to the front room. Light cracked through a splint on the door, and I could see the blackened wool on her arms. I drew myself behind her, a shade for protection. The humans with fire got louder, screaming in a language I do not read. We passed through the wooden door in a moment's grace, appearing as a begrimed quantum union on the other side. I did not look back, nor did she; I followed her dark choreography as we fled towards the burn. The landscape shrouded itself in deepest indigo, enveloping every track and musk left behind as an azure trace.

J O S E P H I N E did not utter a sound, but I understand I must follow; I know fear. We delve silently onto the surface of the water, never wet. Her gait quickens, and a small curved stony bridge appears ahead. She knows the route like veins on a cadaver. A forging lapis path guides us as we twist and turn over steep ground towards a dense forest line. Another boundary awaits. The black mass finds where we had just been and ravages the cottage. Rage, mob, fire implode. A cackling heat erupts on my back, and I shake in both dimensions. Skin burned by distress never heals.

I halt at the forest's edge, awaiting direction. J O S E P H I N E pulls me deeper into the heath of woodland, an attached duet in foliage. She always to the left, I to the right, a double cast of roles. Tall navy trees curve around as we drift, dripping like entangled twines of dancers that form around each slight of limb or head, flowing inwards then out. It seems to be endless movement. I try to catch a breath I do not have. She stops abruptly. Ahead is a small dark wooden bothy⁴ surrounded by an unkempt garden. This is sanctuary. Scattered with symbols scrawled on stones and overgrown herbs, bloodied wool, dried flowers, and branches leaking dew, its vision of Celtic anima is a gift to the underworld. This is what the mob craves. Eradication. Drenched in hatred, stakes and fire, the throng has reached the edge of the forest. Bile drips on leaves, and we are surrounded in terror.

⁴ The term 'bothy' comes from Scottish Gaelic 'bothan' meaning a hut.

JOSEPHINE

A black vacuum sweeps through the branches; no indigo is left to soothe. Ashen fingers gesture me to the side of the bothy. There are no doors to hide in. Silence. Another dark air engulfs. Heartbeats – and they are not mine. She stands in moonlight above me, waiting for hell and a repent of senses. A slight movement appears at the front, then a click in the distance. A spark is seen, then fire morphs into trees, igniting our shadows in a circular blaze. The humans appear one by one – torches for heads, hatred for skin. They are screaming for her. One man, in steel and rags, with flint for eyes, points a stake in flames. He is mad with religious venom. Embers never settle as I grab earth for comfort. I feel as helpless as an exorcised ghost.

JOSEPHINE drifts in an unlit movement, slowly, backward, and opens her mouth towards the men, revealing an archaic cave as deep as her sunken eyes. Screams form behind breasts, but noise never shapes. A sonic reverb of guttural silence bounds out. From her heart, a white echo of light appears, waves bellow, static swells. It engulfs and shatters all and everything.

I see red dirt, earth, heat, and white light. Entanglement ensues. There is a sense of floating in a grey Scottish sky. I catch my breath and collapse into a body with a jolt. I feel blood again. I notice a slight hand touching my leg; red light flickers through glass, and the student is staring at me, tapping my knee, insisting time is up. The actor is gone; an ancient coil remains. An office appears after red. Edinburgh.

It seems this performance is done.⁵



⁵ This Ganzfeld study was conducted at the Parapsychology Department at The University of Edinburgh in 2023, testing individuals (such as this writer) who are deemed ‘creative’ and ‘extroverted performers’ to determine predisposition for psychic (PSI) ability. The results were inconclusive yet the experience remains. A case study in the late 1980s described a series of successful extra sensory perception (ESP) experiments carried out with dance, drama and music students of New York’s Juilliard School, who scored at twice the rate of subjects drawn from the general population: <https://psi-encyclopedia.spr.ac.uk/articles/creative-subjects-ganzfeld>. After some research, Josephine and the location of the cottage was never found.