WITNESS: A DIRECTOR’S RETROSPECTIVE

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It was agreed that we would work intensely for a four-week period … three days a week. This meant that initial ideas were discussed by email or passing conversations in corridors [and the odd dinner] … books/films were suggested and anecdotes exchanged. No idea was dismissed … all was to become part of a vast reservoir from which we all could draw.

SUMMARY

The project WITNESS was a performance-as-research project, which featured an inter-disciplinary work of devised and improvised theatre. The project used performance to investigate the concept of “witness” as/in performance; in this process it used theoretical research in post-colonial theatre and film, post-trauma human rights, justice and ethics studies and the theory of political performance itself.

In the attempt to confront and heal historical and political trauma, states and societies have often used public performances, which centre on concepts of “witness”; on the public confession, truth-telling and apology of injustice, human rights abuses, torture and even attempts at genocide. This has also sometimes involved the public trial of those confessing to these actions. One of the foundational recent events of this performative, cathartic nature has been the South African Truth and Reconciliation process.

Our project investigated the performative nature of these political and social events; that is, their nature as public actions, as “events” with a specific/time and place. We were therefore also interested in the inter-racial and inter-cultural acts of interpretation that such events must engender; the stories that must be constructed and communicated as performed stories. We hypothesised that these stories are always mis-tellings and mis-readings, as they must also be acts of translation. What is the nature of the history that is constructed? What is the nature of the “truth” that is told and “witnessed” by “real” actor and “implicated” audience?

As a performance, our project was itself inter-racial and inter-cultural, involving a Tanzanian actor and film-maker, Dr, Martin Mhando and Australian actor and writer, Dr. David Moody and director/designer Dr. Serge Tampalini; it was also an act of translation and interpretation, because
we constructed the performance out of our own stories and our own devising; our own readings and witnessing of these events. As a performance, we could foreground the way these events involve bodies and emotions; that they were corporeal and material actions in a specific time and place in front of a specific audience. Part of our argument was that the nature of “acting”, as a second-order, witnessed even re-presenting social “action”, can add to our understanding of the emotional and corporeal, as well as intellectual nature of these public performances of “witnessing”.

The project involved research not only in literature on social trauma and ethics itself (including Bauman and Levinas, foundational here); but also work on performance, literature and trauma (including work by Grehan, Rothberg, Clendinnen and Kaplan). We also used memoirs and reportage on specific events, in particular the work of Antjie Krog and Philip Gourevitch.

METHODOLOGY

Our project involved detailed historical research on events such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, The Rwandan and Bosnian war crime trials, and the Australian Bringing them Home report. It also involved the theoretical research outlined above. These works provided the historical background of the work, but we did not use the stories themselves as verbatim sources.

This research was realised through a process of devised performance, involving story telling, improvisation, filming and re-playing. This dramaturgical reading and clarifying of the process was part of the research, as our encounter was also an event of showing, witnessing and performing.

DESIGN

As with all my theatre work, I begin with designing the poster – that will give public visibility to our work and themes. Playing with images allows me to play with ideas … some images attain the status of signs and as such present themselves as puzzles that require the participation of the spectator’s imagination in the unravelling of their meaning … they retain connectivity to the realm of ideas.
The final poster was assembled from two ideas … two heads that confront each other [sharing one eye] – this came out of a photo shoot with David and Martin … and synapses … where our ideas and prejudices are negotiated/rehearsed – hardwired or not.
A series of questions arose from our discussions about how events like the Holocaust and Apartheid happened?

- chance/accident
- positions of power/superiority – political racial and social
- fear and force
- worthlessness
- ignorance

… it was these responses that suggested the opening scene - extracted and rewritten …

Stoppard’s *R and G are Dead*. The tossing of the coin plays with chance/probability. What followed is of major interest to performance researchers … I knew intuitively/blindly that the scene was right … and when Martin reinvented the scene as the unfair/improbable imposition of power, we recast it as the agency into the complex matrix that was the main body of the performance.

Martin within the framing/casting spins coins that always come up against him – heads - a term/activity that is often used to decide who will start a play. The term “heads” is called out at the beginning of all subsequent scenes. It’s not until the end of the play [outside of the frame] that Martin spins tails … the possibility/chance of change … ?
SET

I wanted the performance space to be in-the-round – but the Blue Room Theatre prohibited this … so I went for having the audience on three sides. This ensured that each audience member could witness other audience members witnessing. We are never innocent … always implicated.

The one thing that cannot be denied was that “these traumatic events” occurred … after that it gets complicated. So I needed to contextualise the work. I used projected images by the South African photojournalist Peter Magubane and garnered pictures of dictators and their crimes … onto a wall of stretched clothes … clothes that could have been worn by people who did not survive the trauma of horrendous crimes … a memory wall … witnesses. In front of the wall of clothes I positioned an old wardrobe … large enough for the actors to enter … closets … secrets – and a handy storage place - from which all the props that were used in the play came … every thing and everyone was implicated.

I struggled with how I would visually represent all the people that had “disappeared” or were tortured and silence by tyrannical regimes. I wanted to have a room of skulls … this was impossible within the time frame … and perhaps a little clichéd … ?

Shoes [could talk] … piles of shoes … absent people … silent/silence … that we could let be heard. It also, as I was to discover, connected to the Holocaust Museum.
The audience also enter through a room full of shoes … a liminal space into the site where the performance could take place.

The performance closed with an excerpt from Peter Barnes’ Laughter … recontextualised as an almost frozen moment from a burlesque nightclub performance … in Groucho Marx masks … the insistence on the power of laughter to problematise what could have been a sentimental ending … if an angel of mercy rescues you, that’s one thing, but if the devil rescues you, that’s something completely different … moral uncertainty … where’s god now?
The Stoppard and Barnes’ scenes served as bookends to the work. The overall framing device was a kind of Theatre in Education performance/political theatre … signs were strategically placed throughout the performance … the deliberate intervention [physically] of the female character … placed between the audience and the performance, and finally demonstrated by her character as the director in the final scene in which the performance is deconstructed as part of the work … no one is innocent … there is no one answer … there is no one meaning.

**THE TV STUDIO**

The proscenium style setting presented different problems and some elegant solutions. This was a remembered performance that attempted to reconnect with the traces of the original performance left behind in the performers [and audience] … as such having the performance seen from a single perspective reinforced this … and the shoes were scattered … strewn bits of the past/performance. The images and sound remained constant.

Locating the performance within a conference on *diegetic life forms* proved challenging and exciting. The following is one of the proposed structures for the representation of *Witness* at the conference. It is offered as an insight into the territory we were exploring.

> We propose that defining creative artworks as *abstract forms of life* may be a way of illuminating both strands of academic scholarship…conventional scholarship and the creative arts scholarship.
The above is taken from the conference website, and seems more than pertinent to what we could/might/will do.

The idea is that we present a theatre piece that is not immediately locatable as theatre – yet it bears many of the rules/languages of theatre … lights, set, costumes, dialogue etc

There are two characters [and a director] … from which play? … Pirandello …

The people watching are first of all participants in a conference - it’s just that they have been cast in the role of an audience … that are being spoken to directly, as the three theatre performers try and explicate the point[s] of the play from within the/their theatrical frame. It is the performance that is once again speaking. It is the characters [and director] from the play that speak/perform the conference presentation … in doing so the characters may be read as the diegetic life form that was/is the play…?

OK, a possible structure

The participants arrive to find two characters [and a director - on the book for prompting!] involved in the coin tossing scene … which leads into the soundscape and visuals … ending with hands in the air … BUT instead of continuing the director breaks in and says that we should move onto the Antigone scene … a small amount of discussion … and then the scene. At the end of the scene instead of going into the De Klerk speech … we move into a scene not unlike the last scene of the original production of Witness … in which David contests the effectiveness of our conference strategy … and we try and engage the participants … how can performance be a discourse? … etc

Martin flipping the coin [tails] ends the presentation.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Two men, one Black, one White, meet in the shadow of a horrifying and violent crime; they are asked to bear witness. But exactly what is the nature of the crime they have witnessed? And to whom do they testify? And what good will it achieve for anyone, especially the victims? The stories that they relate and translate are powerful, and have a life, and carry a death, all of their own. They find that they too are being translated and transformed; that someone is witnessing their own trauma.
This play came out of a process of research and improvisation, and seeks to interrogate the relation of witnessing to historical and personal trauma. There is no single narrative except the terrible things humans do to other humans. The stories we tell are gathered from a number of witnesses and a number of texts; we claim no single voice, answer or truth. To the process of hunting and gathering texts we have added our own writing, based on the many and powerful stories we have read. We want to ask the following questions, at least: How do we forgive such horrific acts? Should we even try? Can mere words express, contain, or transform the depths of such suffering? Is silence the most truthful option; or an act of implicit betrayal? How do we stop it happening again? Can hope and love survive in the face of such inhumanity?

What survives an act of inhumanity?

RESOURCE TEXTS

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead [Tom Stoppard]
Country of my Skull [Antjie Krog]
A Human Being Died That Night [Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela]
The Investigation [Peter Weiss]
The Island [Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona]
Laughter [Peter Barnes]
Standard Operating Procedure [Philip Gourevitch & Errol Morris]
We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda [Philip Gourevitch]

The production has been nominated for the best production and best sound design for 2010 as part of the Actor’s Equity Awards.
AUDIENCE RESPONSES

“Witness was brilliant! Writing spectacular”

“I thought the play was very powerful and moving. As a drama student I learned a lot about presentational acting and wow. I don’t know what idiot said it was a mish-mash. I thought it was dynamic and very well showing”

“Brilliant show! Good creative atmosphere. Great actors.”

“Encouraging grass roots theatre, great!”

“Liked the play, until the mask part and the workshop part. For me it detracted from the theme, the frivolous jokes etc took away from actually leaving the venue thinking of the theme.”

“Excellent, entertaining production.”

“A very well performed play, the actors are excellent.”

“Loved the show.”

“Enjoyed it very much.”

“It was a great play.”

“Good times had by all.”

“I had to get used to the small space in the room but once i did i loved it, it's a special feeling to be so close to the stage.”

“Award nominee – Witness.”

“Excellent enlightening play.”

“Let the movies go 3d, live theatre will never be 2d, and even 2d it would never be boring! Thanks for a powerful experience tonight. Though leaving Perth soon I'll take that with me.”

“Witness is a brilliant play.”

“Great show, brilliant mix of moving and funny.”
REVIEWs

[Review: Arts Hub]

Witness
A Ujamaa Production at the Blue Room Theatre

Less a play and more a theatrical essay, Witness trudges through daunting terrain – colonialism in Africa, communism in Cambodia, Islamic terrorism, the Holocaust, and even a brief, uncomfortable glance at our own Northern Territory Intervention. A skim through modern day human atrocity is never going to be easy to wrap up within the hour. Neither deeply moving photojournalism nor words straight from the mouth of Nelson Mandela himself can adequately explain or humanise evil expressed on a grand scale. But in this Ujamaa production, co-writers and performers David Moody and Martin Mhando, and director Serge Tampalini at least use a tentative tread, and, in the end they do admit they are out of their depth. Based on an improvisation processes and the scrambling of several monstrous injustices into one story/essay, the script is not especially elegant (improvisation may be more suited to comedy or at least the lighter side of humanity). The task here, for actors as well as the audience, is to maintain that thread of continuity. Knowledge of world history helps, but if you don’t get the idea the first time around you will still get the point: events and circumstances change, but the moral landscape does not.

We hear the voices and silence of torture sufferers, their families, and a recital of facts from history books. One minute we see into an anguished heart, then into a mind trying to clamour out of darkness with any of the discriminating tools available – philosophy, reason – when just to the side lies a deepening sense of absurdity. As victims cope with disorientation, those who hold power debate semantics. And a court of law, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, attempts justice through its own rigid and ultimately impotent logic. The idea that we all need to bear witness to what has happened is the defining and disarming idea here. And although Witness may seem clumsy and incomplete, there’s a naturalness to the performance that makes it worth watching, and that gives the experience an appropriate sense of humility.
Witness’ is a world premiere play written by Tanzanian actor and film director, Martin Mhando, in conjunction with Murdoch University senior lecturer, David Moody who is also an actor and director. This presentation by the Ujamaa Productions (the Swahili word for ‘collective brotherhood’) is showing at the Blue Room main theatre at 53 James Street, Northbridge nightly at 7.00 pm until 22nd May.

It is Africa, and we weave our way through the mountains of shoes and boots which have been retained when their owners, being worth much less, have been brutally killed. We are led into a room where a black man (Martin Mhando) and his white friend (David Moody) are playing ‘flip the coin’, naturally it comes down ‘heads’ every time, as the black man is always the looser. After a period of enjoying each other’s company, the police arrive and the black man is led away for fraternising with the superior whites and the white man for being a ‘nigger-lover’. The black man has witnessed the appalling crimes of the black activists. Later, with dread and dismay, he relates his memories of the atrocious deeds and their resultant victims, to the African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s white, investigative reporter (Lesley-Anne Philps). She replays her reel-to-reel tape recorder, which recalls a history of decades of torture and trauma.

We see how prisoners over the years have managed to retain their sanity by various means, from transferring their emotions, through to very dark humour. For both the winners and the losers these events do not simply disappear with an apology, in fact, does the word ‘Sorry’ as a token of reconciliation really mean anything to the victims?

Director Serge Tampalini, Murdoch’s Chair of English, has never been known to turn down a challenging play. In 2008, his ‘Gertrude the Cry’ set the bar at a new height for future Blue Room productions, the resulting quality since has been noticeably more mature and mature. ‘Witness’ doesn’t only cover the suffering in Africa, but these talented actors play out numerous situations throughout the world. The Gaddafi and Pinochet regimes, Mandela’s struggle, the holocaust and the stolen generation are all there, as the scene shifts seamlessly from one plight to another.

Serge Tampalini’s simple set consisting of piles of footwear, constantly reminds the audience of the missing millions. The background wall is a collection of clothes and skins of the dead. Onto this wall are projected photos and films of various atrocities, which in conjunction with the eerie sound effects, tribal music and dim, moody lighting (Aleesha Green) retain the atmosphere throughout.
To be appreciated fully, this beautifully structured and scripted play requires a certain amount of prior historical knowledge. The play’s 60-minutes are heavy going, but admirable. This reminds you that theatre was originally as much a messenger, or newspaper of the day, as it was entertainment. Some may find this plain boring, but for others who are interested in the struggles and suffering of the past – and in Africa, the present – they will be amazed at the cruelty of man to his brothers. The programme’s picture shows a neural synapse, posing the question, will the blacks and the whites ever become a synapse with an effective junction?