

Conscience and Consciousness: British Theatre and Human Rights.

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Covid Statement

This project was completed during the Covid Pandemic period of 2019-2022. Therefore, the project was impacted by restrictions on travel and gathering. I couldn't attend some theatre pieces in person, having to rely on digital recordings instead. It also meant that some follow-up interviews were prohibitively postponed because of understandable difficulties in availability and scheduling.

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This thesis is dedicated to John Lax. Who began all this.
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Abstract

This research project investigates a paradigm of human rights theatre. Through the lens of performance and theatre-making, this thesis explores how we came to represent, speak about, discuss, and own human rights in Britain. My framework of ‘human rights theatre’ proposes three distinctive features: firstly, such works dramatise real-world issues and highlights the role of the state in endangering its citizens; secondly, ethical ruptures are encountered within and without the drama, and finally, these performances characteristically aspire to produce an activist effect on the collective behaviours of the audience.

This thesis interrogates the strategies theatre-makers use to articulate human rights concerns or to animate human rights intent. The selected case-studies for this investigation are ice&fire’s testimonial project, Actors for Human Rights; Badac Theatre; Jonathan Holmes’ work as director of Jericho House; Cardboard Citizens’ youth participation programme, ACT NOW; and Tony Cealy’s Black Men’s Consortium. Deliberately selecting companies and performance events that have received limited critical attention, my methodology constellates case-studies through original interviews, durational observation of creative working methods and proximate descriptions of practice.

The thesis is interested in the experience of coming to ‘consciousness’ through human rights theatre, an awakening to the impacts of rights infringements and rights claiming. I explore consciousness as a processual, procedural, and durational happening in these performance events. I explore the ‘æffect’ of activist art and examine the ways in which makers of human rights theatre aim to amplify both affective and effective qualities in their work. My thesis also considers the articulation of activist purpose and the campaigning intent of the selected theatre-makers and explores how their activism is animated in their productions. Through the rich seam of discussion generated by the identification and exploration of the traits of a distinctive human rights theatre, I affirm the generative value of this typological enquiry.

Prologue

I don't want to be here tonight; it's a deep black December night and I've had to take two buses across town. I'm just hoping there will be free wine. It is 2008 and I am attending an event at the British Library called 'Ours by Right', part of a major exhibition called 'Taking Liberties', charting the UK's journey towards personal freedoms, suffrage and human rights. I am in the library atrium with its glinting glass bookcases, goliath pillars and rolling white curves and - tiny in the middle of oversized architecture - there is a slight, white-haired woman dressed in black. This is '*rightsrepeated - an act of memory*', she states and starts to speak into a microphone, softly, insistently, swaying on her toes as she persuades the words come.¹ 'Whereas' she says 'whereas disregards and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts', 'whereas', she says, 'whereas', and she says, 'a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance'.² And then she raises her head, takes in the audience with a steady gaze: 'Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'.³ We are taken through rights that protect life and liberty, against slavery and torture, asserting fair access to justice, then on to freedom of movement, to nationality, and to asylum. Intoning rhythmically, her palm on the small of her back, looking up as if to locate the next Article hanging before her in the air, traced out in her looping handwriting. Then on to Article 16, and there are rights to marriage, to conscience and religion, thought and expression, and then more radically, to social security, standards of living. The right to work and the right to rest. To an education, a cultural life, and to the peace and order that will permit the realisation of these rights. I am struck. As the artist, Monica Ross, tells us that this

¹ Monica Ross. *Monica Ross: Ethical Actions, a Critical Fine Art Practice* (Germany: Sternberg Press, 2016), 135.

² UN General Assembly, 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights,' 217 (III) A (Paris, 1948).

³ Ibid.

performance was in response to the shooting of Jean Charles De Menezes by police in 2005, I am struck.

In my listening that night, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was a hopeful and brave and bold statement of a better world for everyone. In Ross' siting, brought under tension as the state failed in its duties to protect its citizens, memorising this text was a call to have 'an ethical system embedded in you' that would allow everyone to have 'this little bit of courage inside' to challenge authority.⁴ As I found out more about human rights over the following decade this picture became endlessly complicated, but for Ross – a renowned feminist performance artist – this was the 'struggle for personal and public memory and the attainment of human rights as a continual process of individual and collective negotiation and reiteration'.⁵ *Acts of Memory* became a larger artwork for Ross, repeating this act of reciting the UDHR from memory as solo, collective and multilingual performances across a range of locations, from community halls in Wales, to town-halls in the North, schools, art spaces and political seats of power. Ross would sometimes put out a call for people to recite with her, and with limited preparation, anyone who had chosen to recite a particular article could step forward and speak at the allotted time.⁶ Ross stepping forward to recall the words alongside and around the gathered participants; 'a non-division taking place between artist, participant and audience' Yve Lomax observed.⁷ No torture is called for in Spanish and freedom of expression in Urdu, the rights of asylum in German and for justice in Arabic. Noting this turn towards collective activation, Eric Levi Jacobson sees

⁴ Monica Ross, *Acts of Memory* an introduction, 26th September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGJS1w7Nzf4&t=14s>

⁵ Suzanne Triester and Susan Hiller eds. *Monica Ross: Ethical Actions, a Critical Fine Art Practice* (Germany: Sternberg Press, 2016), 135.

⁶ Alexandra M Kokoli 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through in Anniversary – An Act of Memory by Monica Ross and Co-Reciters (2008-),' *Performance Research*, vol. 17, no. 5 (2012) 'On Duration', pp. 24-30.

⁷ Yve Lomax, 'Vocation,' in *Monica Ross: Ethical Actions, a Critical Fine Art Practice*, edited by Suzanne Triester and Susan Hiller (Germany: Sternberg Press, 2016), 37.

the work as engendering, ‘a remembering that turns thought into action where the artwork becomes a life force in itself and simultaneously a life force for others.’⁸ In my repeated viewing of the work I note many people choose to recite Article 24 – the right to rest and leisure – so when I participate in the artwork in the March of 2010, I purposefully select what I feel is the neglected Article 21, concerned with the right to take part in governmental processes and for free elections; ‘The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority’.⁹ When it is my turn to speak, my heart is hammering in my chest and my voice is shaking. For the first time, I think, I catch Ross’ eye, meet her intense watching, and can see her body knowing the words spoken and about to come. These slippages becoming part of the performance; ‘[t]hrough the 60 acts of repetition, forgetting, stumbling, and making common, the declaration of human rights becomes open to use, to new uses, and with that has drops of transformation and potentiality introduced into it’.¹⁰ On the 14 June 2013, the day of the sixtieth, and concluding, *Act of Memory* recited at the 23rd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, Monica Ross, in another country, died of cancer. The artwork had lived beyond her. This big, official text of import and world consequence had been taken to all the ‘small places’ that Eleanor Roosevelt told us that human rights would be found;¹¹ in making the formal, into personal and human-scale, Ross had undertaken ‘the enactment, by the performance of rights, by the demands of humanness enunciated and performed by the rights bearer’.¹²

⁸ Eric Levi Jacobson, ‘Neither Here Nor There,’ in *Monica Ross: Ethical Actions, a Critical Fine Art Practice*, edited by Suzanne Triester and Susan Hiller (Germany: Sternberg Press, 2016), 62.

⁹ UN General Assembly, ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ 217 (III) A (Paris, 1948)

¹⁰ Lomax, ‘Vocation,’ *Monica Ross: Ethical Actions, a Critical Fine Art Practice*, 37.

¹¹ On the tenth anniversary of the ratification of the UDHR, Roosevelt gave a speech at the United Nations, ‘Where Do Human Rights Begin?’: ‘Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.’ See: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/universal-declaration-human-rights-UDHR>.

¹² Jacobson. *Monica Ross: Ethical Actions, a Critical Fine Art Practice*, 63.

In correspondence towards the end of her life, Ross wrote: ‘do you know this quotation from Benjamin - he quotes it from a French historian and his philosophies of history – “no one knows how sad one had to be to want to raise Carthage from its ruins” it took me ages to get this – years... to understand that sadness is a form of energy political and social’.¹³ This thesis is in similar recognition that the human rights project has been as much about ‘sadness’ as it has been about order, or protection, or even hope, and that the act of memory intertwined with sadness inflects the aesthetic and creative qualities of human rights theatre.

¹³ Ross. *Monica Ross: Ethical Actions, a Critical Fine Art Practice*, 16.

Introduction

Auschwitz irrefutably demonstrated the failure of culture.

That it could happen in the midst of all the traditions of philosophy, art and the enlightening sciences, says more than merely that these, the Spirit, was not capable of seizing and changing human beings. [...] Whoever pleads for the preservation of a radically culpable and shabby culture turns into its accomplice, while those who renounce culture altogether immediately promote the barbarism, which culture reveals itself to be.¹

Theodor Adorno repeatedly returned to the problem of cultural representation in the wake of genocide, seeking sense in the face of senselessness, of conscience in the teeth of barbarism, over decades of theorising and phrasemaking. Clarifying the misapplied monitory of ‘poetry after Auschwitz’, reduced to an epigrammatic excuse to remove oneself from the obligation of making meaning,² Adorno wrote of the alienating and dehumanising processes of reification which form barbarous impulses,³ where the result of ‘enlightened thought’ was the irrefutable failure of culture that attended the barbarism of Auschwitz.⁴ For Adorno the arresting proposition was not only had culture failed to prevent the Holocaust, but the apogeeic pursuit of reason had bred totalitarianism, and the capitalist momentum of mass-produced, reproducible art⁵, an accelerant. His was an ethical entreaty to refuse complicity, and instead to reach for a rejuvenated cultural response where refrainment from deductions prevents the unwitting ‘accomplice’,⁶ calling for an art aligned to ‘the formulation of revolutionary demands’.⁷ Adorno’s assertion the ‘sole adequate praxis after Auschwitz is to put all energies toward

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 358.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Camb. Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), 34.

³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2008), 2.

⁶ See Anna-Verena Nosthoff, ‘Art After Auschwitz – Responding to an Infinite Demand: Gustav Metzger’s Works as Responses to Theodor W. Adorno’s ‘New Categorical Imperative’, in *Cultural Politics* 10, 3, (2014), 300–319.

⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 358.

working our way out of barbarism’ is attendant upon the ‘never again’ conviction that formalised human rights in the ashes of the Second World War.⁸ If this evocation of barbarism is understood to invoke a radical and permanently-present call to face infinite ethico-political responsibility in response to an irreversibly barbaric past, then in this thesis I consider how art and culture might be directed towards ‘working our way out of barbarism’ by asserting human rights. Though the lens of performance and theatre-making, I consider how we came to represent, speak about, discuss, and own human rights in Britain.

In *The Future of the Image*, Jacques Rancière turns to the very axiom that trailed Adorno, namely, if there is an ‘indignity of art as an endeavour after Auschwitz’, then there is also a consequent ‘negation of humanity’ and ‘ethical indecency’ in the ‘negation of the representation of that very negation’.⁹ Rancière challenged Adorno’s foundational statement as follows:

The reverse is true: after Auschwitz, to show Auschwitz, art is the only thing possible, because art always entails the presence of an absence; because it is the very job of art to reveal something that is invisible, through the controlled power of words and images, connected or unconnected; because art alone thereby makes the human perceptible, felt.¹⁰

At points this thesis traces its way back to Rancière’s idea of ‘the very job of art’ as the ‘revealing’ force in speaking about trauma, brutality and rights violations through words and images, and specifically the role of making the human both ‘*felt*’ and ‘perceptible’ through the Babel of global political discourse. In *Remnants*, Giorgio Agamben contends totalitarianism thrives on silenced voices, asserting the preventative imperative to listen to precisely what is

⁸ Adorno, *Prisms*, 34.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2009), 74.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2014), 49-50.

deemed unspeakable, ‘to combat the opinion of those who would like Auschwitz to remain forever incomprehensible’.¹¹ Sarah Kofman offers a similarly impassioned ethical counter-argument, calling for endless narrative, boundless stories: ‘if no story is possible after Auschwitz, there remains, nonetheless, a duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal’.¹² Silence alone is insufficient to confront atrocity and to build memorial.¹³ Moreover, it can also allow space for denial and the conditions for erasure. Tracking similar ley-lines to Koffman and Agamben, Dori Laub and Daniel Podell argue in favour of the aestheticised act: ‘while direct attempts at articulation fail to grasp experience, representations of a traumatic experience in art may resonate in response to the absence’.¹⁴ Human rights theatre can move us towards a *poiesis* of non-reproducible, heterogeneous, idiosyncratic culture, ‘universal’ in its reach to the ‘inherent dignity’ of members of the human family.¹⁵

This thesis is composed from the threads of these discourses and debates, reflecting on the politics of re-making and representation embedded in theatre performance, and on the ongoing reproduction of unfathomable violence that continues to rupture our ‘enlightened’ times. I have chosen five case-studies to initiate this investigation, looking at the persuasion of words through the testimonial theatre of ice&fire, stepping inside sensory worlds with Badac Theatre and Jericho House, and engaging with the embodied politics of participation through ACT NOW and the Black Men’s Consortium. If we acknowledge torture and trauma ‘unmakes’ the self, and wraps it in opacity, known not to itself and distant to others, if

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (London: Zone Books, 1999), 11.

¹² Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 36.

¹³ See Dori Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,’ eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: London: Routledge, 1992), 75-92.

¹⁴ Dori Laub and Daniel Podell, ‘Art and Trauma,’ in *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 76, Part 5 (1995), 991.

¹⁵ UN General Assembly, ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ (Paris, 1948), III, A, 217.

violence leads to subjective destruction and compromises capacity for witness, then can aesthetic acts begin to enable disclosure of the self, which in turn, enables recognition of that self to others? If the rites of reproduced brutality engender psycho-somatic disturbances to watchers, and if broadcast can make cultural product of extermination, what is the countercultural ethical art action, and the mode of compassionate communication required to speak truth unto power? If the collapse of the lexis of community in times of extremis and the erosion of collective making leads to agnosticism and alienation, how then might creative gatherings of active participation offer a space for revitalising intervention and social cohesion? How might a human rights theatre offer meaningful encounter, mourning, solace, and restoration?

Human rights were asserted as the foundational ethical and moral corrective to prevent barbarous acts. However, David Rieff emphasises that, despite these ‘firewalls against barbarism’ which have ‘transformed both international law and the normative bases of international relations’, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions of 1949, ‘the murderous twentieth century remained just as murderous’.¹⁶ Moreover, Hannah Arendt disparaged human rights as a paradoxical and utopian conceit.¹⁷ This thesis asks about the role of theatre and performance as insistent art forms which offer a space to reconcile these paradoxes, and develop heightened consciousness intertwined with utopian aspiration. Richard Rorty suggests we abandon the quest for the ‘why’ of human rights, urging instead that we ‘concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education [since] the emergence of the human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad

¹⁶ David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (London: Vintage, 2001), 7.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2017), 304.

and sentimental stories'.¹⁸ Whilst I would assert the continued impact of 'moral knowledge' in human rights theatre, I align '*sentire*' (to feel), and Rorty's idea of 'sentimental education' with a *sentient* response in human rights theatre. In this thesis I want to use Rorty's proposition to consider whether the embodied and dialogic mode of theatre, its 'manipulating [of] sentiments', might assist with the understanding and ownership of a 'human rights culture' by performing the *feelingness* of 'sentimental stories'.

Arguments for a Human Rights Theatre

This thesis proposes an argument for the significance and influence of performance in attempting to subvert what Guy Debord identified as the ruling order's dominating discourse, 'it's never-ending monologue of self-praise',¹⁹ where the dialogic space of theatre aims to provide counter-narratives to state assertion. My thesis is interested in the act of coming to '*consciousness*' in human rights theatre,²⁰ an awakening to the detail of the impacts of rights infringements and rights-claiming, as explored through the presented case studies. As I elucidate below, consciousness is the appreciation not just of the way the unfolding drama impacts characters on stage, but also the perception and comprehension of the effect to others who fall outside of the dramatic frame. Furthermore, an understanding of the political, social, ideological, and cultural structures that permit and sustain this exclusion. Here I develop Derbyshire and Hodson's proposition in their article 'Performing Injustice', that examining human rights issues in theatre is 'to raise consciousness by challenging mainstream accounts and giving voice to the point of view of the dispossessed'.²¹ I argue in this thesis that human

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality,' 111-134, in eds. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurely (eds), *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119.

¹⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Critical Editions, 1984), 24.

²⁰ I explain my use of terms later in the Introduction.

²¹ Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson, 'Performing Injustice: Human Rights and Verbatim Theatre,' in *Law and Humanities* 2, no. 2 (2008), 13.

rights theatre moves us beyond stories which generate fear and pity, past the boundaries of the performance space, to a consciousness of how this sadness came to being. I argue audiences are brought to *sentience* – an awareness – of the issues through the drama via various aesthetic, dramaturgical, theatrical, and extra-textual modes, achieving consciousness as the connection with wider contexts and political structures is made manifest. Consciousness is the very purpose and product of human rights theatre.

My paradigm of ‘human rights theatre’ is built on three perspectives. Firstly, I identify works with a relationship to real-world political events or issues, highlighting the role of the state in protecting or endangering its citizens. The word ‘real’ is already provocative in the fictive/real duality of the performance space, but I conceptualise this as a connection to real-world events or phenomena dramatised through the course of the performance event. Sometimes these are events identifiable as locative to a place or in history; in other instances, these are persistent, recurrent human rights issues and violations that draw together temporal, geographical, and cross-cultural infractions to illustrate patterns of perpetration. Human rights scholarship, argue McClennen and Moore, is the ethical responsibility of ‘operating in and for the “real” world’.²² This resolutely does not preclude fictionalised accounts or highly aestheticised and stylised works which use inventive theatrical, dramaturgical, and somatic devices to amplify their messages.²³ Theatre can operate as a passing-place where the fictional brushes up against the actuality of embodiment and substance of presence to grant access to bodily-consequences of world events. I would note how many ideological interpretations of current affairs and recent history are essentially

²² Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schulteis Moore, ‘Introduction: Aporia and Affirmative Critique,’ in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights*, eds. Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schulteis Moore (Oxford: Routledge 2016) 17.

²³ In terms of fictionalised plays that adhere to my frame, I point to works such as *The Container* by Clare Bayley, *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage, *S27* by Sarah Grochala, *Behud (Beyond Belief)* by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti.

‘fictions’, stories told that distort or conflate events, but also that they are ‘political statements and literary locutions [which] produce effects in reality’.²⁴ Human rights theatre has a similarly *dynamic* engagement with the real, revealing reality – making the invisible visible – or altering perceptions of reality, seeing an issue or event from a different vantage point.²⁵ The aestheticisation of reality ‘defunctionalizes’ the world as it is, thereby allowing an audience to perceive apparently intransigent discourses differently.²⁶ Nor does this evocation of the ‘real’ necessarily preclude substitute-place works,²⁷ or prohibit the use of metaphor and allegory, which dutifully abstract the sites of human wrongs.²⁸ Such material may offer a sideways, oblique examination, changing names and obfuscating place, to reinstate voice where the political conversation has been silenced through state-sponsored acts of violence and coercion, but this operates as code, as a dog-whistle signal for the audience, persuading them to dwell in the twin worlds of the allegorical and the factual.²⁹ I propose that for human rights theatre, we must be able to follow Ariadne’s thread back to the site/s of the trauma and abuse, which will allow us to develop *sentience* towards another’s experience, with the potential to foster consciousness over causation.

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 39.

²⁵ Stephen Duncombe, ‘Does it Work?: The Effect of Activist Art,’ in *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2016), 122.

²⁶ Boris Groys. 2014. ‘On Art Activism,’ in *E-Flux Journal* 56, no. 6, 1–13. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/>.

²⁷ I’m thinking here of plays such as *The Observer* by Matt Charman that tells the story of election observers in a ‘fictional West African country’ which is focused on the topic of state interference in nascent democratic elections – where the smudging of borders is intended to speak for several locations. But critically, in terms of human rights issues, this is concerned with an asymmetric power relationship where the state has broken its contract of representative justice towards the demos.

²⁸ Such as might be found in Pinter’s *One for the Road*, which tackles the subject of state-sanctioned and delivered torture. Not only is Pinter dealing in human rights issues, but furthermore through the extra-textual framing of the work, we understand that this is a criticism of extra-judicial torture in Turkey. Pinter refused to name *Mountain Language* as being specifically about the repression of the Kurdish language, but rather than leave us with no trace back to real world events, he broadens the subjugation out to other world events. ‘The springboard’ he said in interview, ‘was the Kurds, but this play is not about the Turks and the Kurds. I mean, throughout history, many languages have been banned - the Irish have suffered, the Welsh have suffered and Urdu and the Estonians’ language banned; the Basques’ language was banned’. ‘Harold Pinter in Interview’ with Anna Ford, *The Listener*, 27 October 1988.

²⁹ We could include the ‘Arena Conta’ plays at the Teatro Arena under Augusto Boal’s stewardship in the late 1960s which used allegorical forms, though *Arena Conta Bolivar* was amongst the many plays censored in Brazil.

My second proposition for human rights theatre is that it is a place where moral and ethical ruptures are encountered within and without the drama through the playing out of victim/perpetrator dynamics. These ruptures might be presented to us in dramatised dialogic exchange within the drama (e.g. a racially-profiled Kwame arrested in Cealy's Forum Theatre plays); or in the historicised recall of testimony (e.g. Germain's account of choosing to leave family members behind in ice&fire's *Asylum Monologues*); or indeed, sedimented into the fabric of the produced event, where the very gathering together of a particular group indicates the ruptures encountered, amplified through contextual personal autobiography (e.g. Cardboard Citizens' ACT NOW where the plays strike a celebratory final note in contrast to prior adversity participants have overcome). These ruptures might be within the drama moment or taking place within the audience; thus, I want to gesture here to *sentience*, the awareness and felt-understanding created through the duration of the performance event, and to consciousness, where ruptures *within* the drama are transferred to the *without* frame of the audience.

Finally, my framing mechanism suggests the performances under discussion also seek to have an activist effect on the collective behaviours of the audience, prompting them to adjust their lived responses post-event. I locate an activist intent in human rights theatre, with the idea something should change as a result of the audience collecting in the performance space, whether embodied action or the wider ventilation of counter-truths permitting recalibrations of justice. Activism might be commuted very directly in asking the attending public to commit to action at the event itself, or via linking explicitly to campaigning groups,

or positioned more as a transformation in thinking to change public discourse.³⁰ If the issues are ongoing and present, the audience might be motivated to act urgently, if the events described are historicised, the activism might be to underscore the human rights commitment to ‘never again’.³¹ This activist drive can be read as a recalibration to world affairs, and the animation of an ethico-political commitment, but also as localised behaviours, a commitment to self-empowerment. Furthermore, in collecting the audience together as a community of conscience, a web of accountability is created, extending beyond the duration of the performance event.

This thesis further argues it is the *ou-topos* – ‘no-placeness’ – of theatre performance space that allows for the re-siting of human rights questions and concerns. I identify the ‘utopian’ potential of theatre performance connecting with the ‘aspirational’ articles of faith of human rights declarations. The aporetic condition of the non-place, means a space to sit with, and decode those ‘peculiar barbaric impetuses that prevail’.³² The malleable terrestrial and temporal space of the theatre, permitting multi-modal representations, and supple contracting with the audience, oscillating between the make-believe and the actual is an art form to straddle the ineffable and envision the utopic. I do not contend theatre space is not ‘placed’ within the politics of its social and cultural locale, but rather in the moment(s) of performance, the *utopos* of the contract to perform contains the radical and emancipatory potential called for by the human rights project. The theatre is not an institution or paradigm charged with articulating ethico-political discourse any more than any other cultural medium;

³⁰ Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2007), 5.

³¹ Of course, the theatre event may not always be fully or perfectly realised for the activist intentions of the maker to be transferred to the response of the audience, or the ideo-political nature of the work might become obscured through the playing out of the artwork, as I highlight through the instances depicted in the case-studies.

³² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 268.

nevertheless, the specific conditions of live presence of the perpetually mortifying and yet surviving, wounding and woundable body before us in performance, is a unique mode for the rescaling of human rights questions and events.

This thesis, therefore, also argues for theatre and performance as offering modes of representation and representability of human rights traumas and perpetrations. This is not to undermine the unknowability of trauma between human subjects, nor to reduce the psychic schism of those barbarisms accompanying ‘tyranny and oppression’,³³ but rather to add to the range of critical voices asserting the value of creative modes to provide insight into the worst of human rights violations. Naomi Mandel cautions against the ‘rhetorical performance of evoking the unspeakable [...] masquerading as ethical practice’ where there are political dangers of *denial* in evoking incomprehensibility.³⁴ I locate the ethico-political injunction in pursuing the communication, discussion, and representation of the worst of human experiences, not to recycle trauma for vicarious thrills, but to ventilate the shroud of silence around cruelties which further inscribe victimhood as a form of ‘mortification’ by designating experiences as shameful beyond comprehension. Moreover, as Luckhurst and Morin posit, theatre is inherently tied to the unspoken and the unspeakable: ‘it exploits silence, site, the body, gesture and objects in order to speak to, for and against’.³⁵ I point to the possibility of a protective architecture through the aesthetic mediation of theatre, where literal and figurative framing allows for a certain autonomy over entry and egress, allows for decompression, and where structured participation can provide a pathway to personal regeneration.

³³ UN General Assembly, ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ (Paris, 1948), III, A, 217.

³⁴ Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 12.

³⁵ Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin, *Theatre and Human Rights After 1945: Things Unspeakable* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

This thesis proposes that by resituating imposing grand narratives and incognisable global problems – sometimes deliberately obfuscated to seem complex – back into the human scale of performers and participants, comprehensible in re-humanisation, the cause and effect becomes graspable through the *sentient* felt-understanding of human costs.³⁶ This argument stands as deliberate amelioration to the dehumanisation that Stanton delineates in his configuration of the ‘10 Stages of Genocide’, where such barbarism is indispensable to processes of extermination.³⁷ I recognise this as a theological project of prophecy, with the human figure standing in for a belief system. Although reducing the story to an individual body might seem antithetical to a collective project of human rights action, it aligns with notions that rights are located within the individual for social realisation, and thus, the contextual collective architecture of the performance event allows watchers to extrapolate renewed consciousness back out to other bodies.

Research Questions

The animating problématique of this thesis is the identification of a ‘human rights theatre’. Here I am thinking of ‘a theatre’ as a movement, as a genre – certainly with differences of inflection and emphasis, with outliers and disputants, but nevertheless as a type. Undoubtedly, there are plays which expose human rights issues and those that critique the hegemonic assumptions of a misapplied human rights agenda³⁸, there are even building-based sites

³⁶ Indeed, in the 1997 version of Handspring Puppet Theatre’s *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, human scale was further exaggerated to show the perpetrator Pa Ubu denuded of all vestments to reframe him within his mortalised body, larger than the mournful puppet ‘victims’ reciting the testimonies of brutality.

³⁷ Gregory Stanton, ‘10 Stages of Genocide’, Accessed March 4, 2018, Genocidewatch.net, <http://genocidewatch.net/genocide-2/8-stages-of-genocide/>.

³⁸ We might think of Hannah Khalil’s *The Scar Test* (2017), for a play that attempts to ‘expose’ the indignities of asylum detention in a play that looks at human rights issues, and to Adam Brace’s *They Drink It in the Congo* (2016), for a work that satirises misplaced governmental and NGO intervention. The Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award connected to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe provides interesting and provocative lists of plays that connect to human rights issues.

synonymous with human rights, or theatre companies with missions to explore human rights,³⁹ but my hypothesis here is that a ‘human rights theatre’ can be identified as a recognisable, commensurable entity. Rather than finding pearls of human rights policies and spikes of human rights thinking in dramatic works and performances, what might we learn about modes of social and political theatre by categorising and analysing human rights theatre as a genre? I suggest human rights theatre is distinct from any of its near neighbours, from political theatre, issue-based theatre, testimonial theatre, community theatre; overlapping with aspects of these overlapped categories but constituted in a unique way that adds to the cultural discourse. All genre definition is problematic; nonetheless, this thesis reflects the search for potentially helpful ways of grouping together ideas, intentions, practices, and outcomes to understand the political ideologies and aesthetic ideas in play. Below I enumerate the research questions which flow from my hypothesis and central problem to form my investigatory clew.

The first research question is concerned with whether a model of ‘human rights theatre’ can be usefully constructed to help understand what identifies and distinguishes this mode of practice. To respond to this over-arching enquiry, I interrogate the strategies theatre-makers use to articulate human rights concerns or to animate human rights intent. I question how artists are communicating or signalling the wider structural concerns of human rights, where the rights of the citizen-subject are configured in relation to the state, with particular focus on artists’ methods of making connections with real-world instances of human rights abuse. Furthermore, I question the palette of aesthetic choices and artistic formulations makers use to represent often intense, brutal, or contested human rights issues. With moral and ethical rupture contained within the drama, there is a corollary enquiry regarding the theatrical and

³⁹ Here I could point towards the ‘Tribunal’ plays era at the Tricycle Theatre (now known as the Kiln Theatre), and there are theatre companies that expressly have human rights in their mission statements – ice&fire theatre and Badac being two represented as case-studies in this thesis.

representational modes makers use to perform this schism. This is related to a question about what it means for an actor to stand-in for the victim-subject, or to represent the perpetrator, on stage, to consider the ethical dimensions of acts of surrogacy and actors as avatars. Finally, I question the articulation of activist interest or intent that theatre-makers signal in the making of their productions – what is it they want their audiences to do after the performance event? – to understand how their activism is animated, within an exploration of the interplay of effect and affect in human rights theatre.

This thesis questions how contemporary theatre artists have used dramaturgical and performative devices to address moral and ethical imperatives to speak in the full knowledge their utterance can never replicate the experience of the addressee. I examine how makers have sought to activate and inhabit the '*differend*' position, and the radical chasm between signifier and signified in traumatic experience, via theatrical and aesthetic means. Accepting Adorno's argument, 'perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream',⁴⁰ I ask what ethical and representational tensions are inherent in the dramatisation and aestheticisation of 'suffering' in performance. Allied to this enquiry, what forms of theatre or performance might offer alternatives to re-inscriptions of trauma and suffering. Next, at a political level, I ask what are the dramaturgical and formal methods by which makers accentuate structural responsibility and emphasise the locus of culpability to sit not solely with the individual but to highlight the role of the state? This thesis will also interrogate why contemporary theatre-makers have repeatedly addressed the grouping of Civil and Political Rights (the CPR) in the wider human rights discourse. How does a fixation with human rights issues such as genocide and mass atrocity threaten to perpetuate a voyeuristic position, and is

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 354.

there a discernible continuation of supremacy and colonisation in the way many of these playwrights typically locate infringements and perpetrations overseas? Are there antidotes to apparently sensationalist foci in works privileging and prioritising humour and collectivity? From the obverse, why might the Economic, Cultural and Social Rights (ECSR) cluster be challenging for writers to address, especially when addressing human rights concerns in an ostensibly democratic rights-abiding UK?

The span of this thesis is an examination of the presentation of the transmission of authority and credibility to speak of abuses of liberty, equality, and dignity. I question the relationship between the proxy and the 'real' activated in the space between maker and receiver when performing actual-world issues and events. I ask about the ideological, ethical, and dramatic implications of transposing real-world events and human rights issues into the performance space and assess the erasure of factual specificities in the act of relocation. This thesis seeks to understand what happens when performances of human rights catastrophes are re-shaped and re-staged to 'speak for', or indeed to commemorate existent global events. Are these acts of transposition, which may necessitate the use of disguise or occlusion, inimical to the illuminating and truth-telling objectives of the wider human rights project, and in tension with the disclosive power of the performance platform? This thesis interrogates the signs and sensual languages which allow the audience to encounter and understand a range of 'realities' simultaneously. I analyse the limits of truth claims, and challenge assumptions that to fictionalise or aestheticise is necessarily to exploit real-world human subjects, their subjective pain and suffering decontextualised and anaesthetised in the theatrical moment, to make artistic capital or spectacular spectacle out of the experiences of the oppressed.

Explanation of Key Terms

One of my key terms, ‘conscience’, is closely enmeshed in human rights discourse;⁴¹ the term denotes both the inner force that compels recognition of moral acts, and the ethical inducement towards right action; for my purposes, it is understood to be constructed through social acclimatisation and consensus. The preamble to the UDHR asserts the Declaration as a transnational shield against the ‘contempt for human rights’ that has ‘outraged the conscience of humankind’.⁴² Travelling from social readings of the term ‘conscience’ to individualistic precepts, Article 1 of the Declaration states, ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood’.⁴³ This text situates conscience as an absolutist moral force without provision for culturally relativist understandings of the term, but within these headline statements, it does observe human beings as agentic forces.

I also capitalise on the historic synonymic exchange of ‘conscience’ for ‘consciousness’, for a stretched relational and ethical understanding of (self-)awareness. Indeed, this thesis is heavily indebted to the animation of these terms by Paolo Freire, drawing on his ideas of ‘conscientization’ as the ability to perceive received fragments of information as interconnected;⁴⁴ to comprehend the underlying structures of power in order to change them.⁴⁵ Freire amplifies Marx’s rhetoric of consciousness, where the image of awakening from a solipsistic dream is extended beyond the transformation of one person’s state of awareness, to the mutual achievement of what György Lukács termed ‘class

⁴¹ Indeed, there is an official United Nations International Day of Conscience (April 5): <https://www.un.org/en/observances/conscience-day>.

⁴² UN General Assembly, ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ III, A, 217.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), 104.

⁴⁵ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2005), 12.

consciousness'.⁴⁶ I see the desire to assert political will in Marx's application of consciousness as mirroring the drive to activism that I identify in human rights theatre. For Freire, 'potential consciousness' is an awakening to internalised oppression, which can develop into 'critical consciousness', knowledge of the systemic violence perpetuated by denial of social and cultural rights. Aligning to Adorno's rejection of reification, Freire posited critical consciousness as a discovery that, 'as people—they can no longer continue to be "things" possessed by others; and they can move from consciousness of themselves as oppressed individuals to the consciousness of an oppressed class'.⁴⁷ Conscientization for Freire was a praxis, an exposure to social and political contradictions, achieving a broader analysis of conditions, allowing for self-determined action against the revealed oppressive structure. For Freire, critical consciousness is different from 'consciousness raising', the latter involving transmission of preselected knowledge. Through the span of this thesis, I encounter both forms of political consciousness, and certainly alight upon moments of 'false consciousness', where embodiments of hegemony are misapplied as envisioning rights. Finally, I also utilise the term in relation to Emile Durkheim's configuration of 'collective-consciousness', as the relational understanding of individual action interlaced into a dynamic social and moral system with the ability to create accelerated change through communal effort.⁴⁸

I institute the locution '*sentience*' within this thesis to complement my use of the term consciousness in my interpretative framework. By utilising these *bodied* terms, I am also indicating the bio-politics of human rights. In a combination of neuro-ethical, philosophical, psychological, and political applications of the term, I use *sentience* to describe a state of felt-

⁴⁶ György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

⁴⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 174.

⁴⁸ See Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2013).

understanding; to be brought to cognition through knowledge and an affective and sensitised encounter, where *sentience* offers cognition of the ‘other’.⁴⁹ If consciousness is to be

awakened to the political and ideological structure (in this case, of instances of oppression), then I conceive and formulate *sentience* as a pathway, as an alertness or awareness.

‘Sentience’ in Marxist conceptions is the practical rejection of a materialist synthesis, denoting an ability to recognise structural conditions and contradictions, opening the prospect for practical change in human circumstance, as groundwork for revolutionary practice.⁵⁰ The recognition of sentience in corporeality throws the subject position of the autonomous individual into crisis when recurring violences are enacted against them. Kristine Stiles points towards sentience as interaction between the individual and the social body, and where performance is the direct medium to demonstrate sentience as a subversive presence that insists on human experience, pointing towards the destructive impact of ‘human emergency’.⁵¹ Neuroethics contends sentient beings are ‘interested’, and understand pleasure and displeasure, and are thus marked by subjective experiences not always present in adjacent understandings of consciousness.⁵² Beyond questions of awareness, sentience also indicates being finely sensitive in perception or feeling, which I draw on here to cluster together the affective and sensorial dimension of the works under discussion. I contend *sentience* is distinct from compassion or empathy in my composure of performance vocabulary;⁵³ both are components of *sentience*, but bonded with information and within an

⁴⁹ I italicise my formulation of sentient/sentience in relation to performance studies to highlight my use of the term in relation to ideas of the performance event.

⁵⁰ Richard W. Wilkie, ‘Karl Marx on Rhetoric,’ *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 9, no. 4 (1976), 233.

⁵¹ Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 42.

⁵² David DeGrazia, ‘Sentience and Consciousness as Bases for Attributing Interests and Moral Status: Considering the Evidence and Speculating Slightly Beyond,’ L. Syd M. Johnson, Andrew Fenton and Adam Shriver, *Neuroethics and Nonhuman Animals. Advances in Neuroethics* (Springer, 2020), 1.

⁵³ I distinguish *sentience* from empathy, perceiving *sentience* as a matrixed and relational response, aligning to Jill Bennett’s conceptualisation of empathy as ‘assimilated to the self in the most simplistic and sentimental way; anything beyond the audiences immediate experience remains beyond comprehension [...] We fail to respect the difference between the suffering and our own’. See Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 111.

affective relationship, to create a felt-understanding of the material context. I am also interested in using the term ‘sentience’ because of its use in transhuman studies to describe the point where a surrogate apparatus becomes recognisable as human, which offers productive comparisons to the actor or participant as *sentient* in another’s place. In digital ethics, sentience is a property with discursive intentionality, where the relation between sentience and sapience can be understood as a continuum not universally differentiable.⁵⁴ Other world philosophies have different conceptions of sentience which are also helpful for my purposes, where within Buddhism a sentient being is ‘subject to illusion, suffering, and rebirth’ which demonstrates alignment to affective capacities,⁵⁵ to experience feelings as well as imaginatively hypothesise those feelings for another, and moreover for transformation and transcendence, mirroring the process potential within theatre. By layering the meaning of *sentience* as performance vocabulary throughout this thesis, I also gesture to the use of sentience in moral campaigning movements seeking to recognise the worth of another, here affiliating this moment of recognition to the drive of the human rights project.

My conception of how activist art works is beholden to Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre who describe the term ‘artivism’ as ‘a hybrid neologism that signifies work created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism’,⁵⁶ and the expression of a mode of ‘liberatory consciousness’ rejecting passive observations of social realities, for enactments of more ‘defiant forms of witnessing’.⁵⁷ Sandoval speaks of the convergences between creative expression, social activism, and self-empowerment in

⁵⁴ Sarah Spiekermann, ‘The Ghost of Transhumanism & the Sentience of Existence,’ Manifesto, NZZ (June 19, 2017).

⁵⁵ UNHCR, *The Buddhist Core Values and Perspectives for Protection Challenges: Faith and Protection*, UN High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges Theme: Faith and Protection (November 22, 2012).

⁵⁶ Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre, ‘Chicana/o Artivism: Judy Baca’s Digital Work with Youth of Color,’ in *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media*, ed. Anna Everett (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 82.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

activism, rendering it capable of multidimensional meanings and the ability to negotiate multiple worldviews.⁵⁸ Sandoval proposes the differential consciousness of activism as functioning like the clutch of a car, the mechanism of which permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for an adjustable transmission of power. Here, there is a belief that in confronting hegemonic systems, no matter how pervasive, there will be interstitial spaces where agency will bubble up. In the case of the artists and makers featured in this thesis, I examine how they have ‘selected’, ‘engaged’ and ‘disengaged’ mechanisms of art practice in the transmission of their message, influencing the force and direction of their activism.

Finally, the attempt in this thesis to productively fuse ‘affect’ with ‘effect’ to understand human rights theatre builds on use of the neologism ‘*Æffect*’, coined by Steve Lambert and Stephen Duncombe, who, under the aegis of the Center for Artistic Activism, assert ‘we’re moved by affective experiences to do physical actions that result in concrete effects: Affect leads to Effect. We might think of this as Affective Effect, or perhaps, Effective Affect’⁵⁹, and thus they create the word-bond to express this symbiotic relationship. ‘Artistic Activism is a practice aimed at generating *Æffect*: emotionally resonant experiences that lead to measurable shifts in power’.⁶⁰ I adopt Lambert and Duncombe’s term ‘*æffect*’; using the lower-case orthography which has filtered down into subsequent activist applications.⁶¹

⁵⁸ All of which is not to deracinate or to eliminate gender from Sandoval and Latorre’s work, which imagines ‘activism’ as a method to transcend the ‘double consciousness’ and the ‘object/subject’ duality experienced by the *mestiza*.

⁵⁹ Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert, *Why Artistic Activism* (New York: The Center for Artistic Activism, 2018), 3.

⁶⁰ Duncombe and Lambert, *Why Artistic Activism*, 3.

⁶¹ *Æ* (lowercase: *æ* or *æ* when italicised) is a character formed from the letters a and e, originally a ligature representing the Latin diphthong ae. It has been promoted to the status of a letter in Scandinavian languages. ‘[U]sing the grapheme *æ*, we can encompass both affect and effect by creating a new word: *Æffect*’. Duncombe and Lambert, *Why Artistic Activism*, 3.

Scope of the enquiry

Whereas some of the major producing theatres in the British context have supported and commissioned theatre work which examines human rights issues –for instance the later works of seasoned British dramatists such as Caryl Churchill, David Hare and Harold Pinter – the concentration of human rights theatre is in the hands of individual makers, small companies, and community groups. Returning to Eleanor Roosevelt’s identification of human rights starting in ‘small places’, this thesis reflects a purposeful intent to highlight some less well-known and less theorised theatre-makers, or aspects of their work that have received less critical attention. This thesis presents a network of events, performances and plays that can be distinguished from the ‘politics of theatre going’, or even ‘political theatre’ as a category or methodology of arts practices.⁶² Rather, this thesis examines human rights specifically as negotiating a contract with officialised governance, where the ‘role of the state as both ‘principal violator and essential protector’ of human rights implies the continued importance of understanding the relation to the nation’.⁶³ The responsibility to uphold rights is undertaken by an identifiable executive authority, where it is ‘the obligations of Governments to act in certain ways or to refrain from certain acts, in order to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups’.⁶⁴ Human rights can be recognised as a practice related to the nation state’s legal and political systems, with infringement as the wilful hostility or negligence by the state in the upholding or activation of rights.⁶⁵

⁶² In clear terms, ‘political theatre’ can be thought of as ‘theatre that looks at issues, and asks the audience to think further about these issues’, Billy Cowan and Kim Wiltshire, *Scenes from the Revolution: Making Political Theatre* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 6.

⁶³ Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights: In Theory and Practice*, Second Edition (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 15.

⁶⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council, Human Rights Council, (Geneva: OHCHR, 2017).

⁶⁵ Cardenas highlights this tension: ‘States are the basic guarantors of human rights protections, just as they can be brutal violators of human rights’, Sonia Cardenas, ‘Human Rights and the State’, in *Oxford Research*

This thesis is written in the context of serious questions over the future of the UK Human Rights Act 1998.⁶⁶ I choose as my temporal framework the twenty-five years of British social, cultural, and political history between the pledges to install the UK Human Rights Act by Tony Blair in the accession to political power of the Labour party in 1996 to the present day (2022), when the UK stands on the precipice of ‘repeal or reform’.⁶⁷ This research scope captures the ‘crisis’ around the Act:⁶⁸ concerns over annexation of British sovereignty, and contrarily, uncertainty around continuations of legal protections offered by the Act, especially as the UK disaggregates from federal structures post-Brexit. Additionally, this thesis is informed by the shifts in political perspectives and gravitational causes over this period, and the gradual recognition of less dominant voices through alternative channels – especially social media – which complicate official narratives, coupled with drastically accelerated global news circulation and different distributions of ‘fact’. Some of these political reckonings have leaned upon human rights discourse to substantiate their position,⁶⁹ whereas other groups have rejected human rights structures as the worst of western prejudices, enshrined in ways that maintain preordained power structures.⁷⁰

Encyclopaedia of International Studies, last modified November 30, 2017, last accessed January 5, 2000, <https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-52>

⁶⁶ Nathan Stephens-Griffin, ‘Priti Patel’s “activist travel bans” are another blow to human rights in the UK,’ *The Conversation*, last modified October 12, 2021, last accessed October 12, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/priti-patels-activist-travel-bans-are-another-blow-to-human-rights-in-the-uk-169386>

⁶⁷ I am not collapsing the human rights questions for the constituent parts of the UK into one political bloc. Questions of assumed common values, shared legislation and means of accountability towards the state, have been fundamentally rethought through the process of parliamentary devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Human rights issues and questions for Northern Ireland, for example, are not reproductions of those in England, especially as some human rights abuses conducted in Northern Ireland were perpetrated by the British armed forces; the relationship here is not just familial, but also one of victim and perpetrator, to use the classic reference points of the human rights paradigm.

⁶⁸ Vicky Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st Century Britain: Theatre of Crisis* (London: Methuen, 2017), 4.

⁶⁹ Both Black Lives Matter and #metoo as recent socio-political movements variously invoked the lexicon of human rights to support their cause, and conversely were lauded by the human rights corpus for their grassroots activism. See, for example, OHCHR, ‘#metoo: A Transformative Moment, Liberating and Empowering,’ (Geneva, March 6, 2018),

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22767&LangID=E>.

⁷⁰ Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama, The Gift of Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 136.

Theoretical context

This transdisciplinary thesis builds on previous investigations of human rights articulations in theatre, most notably Luckhurst and Morin's collection of essays, *Theatre and Human Rights after 1945*, on the 'unspeakable' in a global theatre context.⁷¹ This book contains contributions from performance theorists who are recurrent interlocutors in this thesis: Emma Cox for her scholarship on theatre, migration, and asylum; Cathy Caruth for her work on trauma; Carol Martin and Mary Luckhurst for their considerations of 'theatres of the real'. My thesis was also informed by Helen Nicholson's chapter on 'Human Rights in Performance' as part of her seminal 2005 book, *Applied Drama, The Gift of Theatre*. Nicholson offers a careful critique of human rights as a problematic site of imposed western hegemonic standards, uncritically adopted as an anodyne alternative to political radicalism, before progressing to constructively consider 'how practice might mediate the gap between local and global discourses'.⁷² Within her applied theatre enquiry, Nicholson focuses her investigation overseas, proximate to the concerns of 'Theatre for Development' and located in the 'dialectic between identity and alterity'.⁷³ This thesis aims to develop these analyses, but with a concentration on British Theatre practice, and with a sustained purview and paradigm applied to different theatrical and aesthetic practices, looking not just for evidence of human rights discourse within theatre, but for a 'human rights theatre' *per se*.

Moving through the chapters of this thesis, the reader will encounter three different – but overlapping – theatre vocabularies and fields of scholarship. The proliferation of first-

⁷¹ See Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin, *Theatre and Human Rights after 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁷² Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama, The Gift of Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 140.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 149.

person speech acts defined as ‘testimonial theatre’ or ‘verbatim theatre’ is considered in the first chapter, utilising theorists such as Amanda Stuart Fisher, Derek Paget, Tom Cantrell, Alison Jeffers, and Chris Megson, and deploying the latter’s key work with Alison Forsyth, *Get Real* (2009) extensively. Chapter Two concerns theatres of physical proximity and immersivity, and here I am in dialogue with Adam Alston, Jen Harvie, Baz Kershaw, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Liz Tomlin, as well as Claire Finburgh Delijani and Jenny Hughes to help conceptualise spectacular presentations of warfare. Finally, Chapter Three focuses on applied and participatory theatre, utilising writings by James Thompson, Gareth White, D. Soyini Madison, Caoimhe McAvinchey, and Dani Snyder-Young and drawing on global studies of the Theatre of the Oppressed from Ali Campbell, Barbara Santos, and Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman.

For critical understandings of human rights, particularly as pertaining to broader representations of rights in culture, theorists such as Anthony Woodiwiss, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, Lawrence Friedman, Amy Shuman and Nigel Eltringham are deployed, as well as critical thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Michael Ignatieff, who offer both analysis and sometimes first-hand observation. As the idea of ‘witness’ to atrocities and barbarism is remade in the theatre moment, the thesis also draws upon theorists such as Annette Wiewiorka and Eric Stover who have explored the weight of responsibility to ‘bear witness’ and the concomitant ‘trauma’ ushered in through the active-passive tension embodied in this position. This is further theorised in the writings of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and performance scholar Patrick Duggan. This thesis is also informed by the landmark publication, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, And History* by literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub, to consider what might constitute an ‘act’ of testimony, and how testimony is problematised when (re-)performed in theatre spaces, either by the ‘owner’, or by

another proxy body. Sara Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are used to help think through ideas of affect and the relationship between feeling, experiencing, knowing and acting-upon. Finally, aesthetic theory is located within what Claire Bishop refers to as the ‘social turn’ in arts practice, towards relational aesthetics and ‘socially-engaged’ or ‘social practice’ art, with Jacques Rancière deployed to think through ‘emancipated spectatorship’ and the process of activation through art, and thence theatre practice.

Thesis methodology

This thesis deploys a mixed methodological approach, bringing together extrinsic and contextual analyses of the socio-political and cultural environment with the intrinsic and diegetic examinations of performance events to constellate new understandings of a human rights theatre in this interdisciplinary study. This thesis is a typological endeavour; my paradigm for human rights theatre is not conceived as a method for metrical comparative evaluation, but rather, notes that in identifying clusters of shared characteristics and/or priorities, there will be hot-spots (and comparative cold-spots) for each production. My conception of this study resembles a radar graph, with areas of the graph lighting up and others showing softer luminosities dependent on the focus of enquiry. This study does not attempt to determine which theatre-maker’s approach to human rights abuse is ‘best’ or most effective, but rather to analyse *how* these choices work, and what the aesthetic/representational, political, and ethical impacts are. This paradigm is built on ‘ideal types’, Max Weber’s notion of constructs that identify characteristics and elements of a given phenomenon but are not meant to correspond equally or evenly to all of the characteristics of

any one particular case.⁷⁴ In the analysis of exemplars of human rights theatre, I am also interested in those artists who return to the questions and problems raised, and whose sustained exploration of subjects, therefore, reveals something about the favoured strategies and approaches used to achieve their aims.

The case-studies in this thesis are of ice&fire's 'Actors for Human Rights' programme, Badac Theatre Company, Jericho House, the Black Men's Consortium, and ACT NOW, the youth programme for Cardboard Citizens. I conduct analysis and synthesis of extant critical literature, combining performance research with ethico-legal writings, political theory, and cultural studies to situate the creative works under examination, and to place them in enlivened dialogue with human rights discourse. Inevitably where there is little existing critical theory or academic analysis, this has inflected the research methodology, and I constellate case-studies through numerous research interviews, durational observation of creative working methods and proximate descriptions of practice, introducing a range of formal and informal commentators to illuminate process.

I situate this work in the domain of 'critical ethnography' in its acknowledgement of a subjective position,⁷⁵ especially given my own role as a theatre-maker, but also in recognition that my research is set within discourses of social change, power and politics, all of which require vigilant reflexivity.⁷⁶ This is particularly pertinent to my relationship with

⁷⁴ Weber wrote: 'An ideal type is formed by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those onesidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct' (Weber, *The Methodology of The Social Sciences*, eds. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch [New York: Free Press, 1997], 90).

⁷⁵ Roger I. Simon and Donald Dippo, 'On critical ethnographic work,' *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1986), 195.

⁷⁶ See Laurel Richardson, 'The Politics of Location: Where Am I Now?,' *Qualitative Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (1998), 41; Laurel Richardson, 'Introduction—Assessing Alternative Modes of Qualitative and Ethnographic Research: How Do We Judge? Who Judges?,' *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (June 2000), 251–52; and Laurel Richardson, 'Poetic Representation of Interviews', in *Handbook of Interviewing*, eds. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2002), 877-891.

ice&fire, where my involvement with the theatre company requires me to remain attentive to the need for objective analysis whilst enmeshed. This thesis includes direct observation of performance practice, along with close-readings of play texts, moving between the exteriority of structural analysis of the non-diegetic architecture of the work, and into the diegetic content, or the interiority of how human rights are discussed and portrayed by the events and machinations inside the ‘world of the play’. As well as these more conventional lines of analysis, I also record my personal reaction to performances and my subjective snapshot of audience responses. I attempt to map audience demographics, bringing the character of the venue into play, to set my analysis of the work in the context of the locative values of space and place. These ‘wild tracks’ and ‘field recordings’ are occasionally quoted directly in the thesis, to self-consciously animate ‘experiential’ properties. The accompanying shift in tone to these recollections echoes the necessary poetics of a phenomenological approach, where critical distance shifts, and I record myself being challenged, moved, lost, and restored by the creativity and courage of others.⁷⁷ I use my own *sentient* felt-understanding to analyse affect. Field-recordings are cross-referenced with critical notices, published audience feedback, and research into the makers’ intentions and guiding principles. Qualitative evidence is offered to provide data on transient moments, to appreciate the imperfect place of subjectivity, but also to assay a form of multi-layered mapping. If all cartography is to condense meaning, then this methodology also invites us to re-trace new lines over the map, and as feminist sociologist Laurel Richardson contends, to see poeticised description as an attempt to re-complexify, and to stand outside and survey, to *experience* the territory.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Deborah Pearson, ‘Unsustainable Acts of Love and Resistance: The Politics of Value and Cost in One-on-One Performances,’ *Canadian Theatre Review* 162 (2016).

⁷⁸ See Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St. Pierre, ‘Writing: A Method of Inquiry,’ in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage, 2005), 959-978.

I use the concept of ‘reticulation’ to characterise the praxis of exploration in this study. In a reticulated network sometimes the boundary walls are completely intact, sometimes partial, and at other times merely fragmentary.⁷⁹ In a conscious paradigm of ‘deterritorialisation’, non-hierarchical entry points are permitted, and contradictory voices are brought into encounter.⁸⁰ I suggest the above is not just to appeal for a reader’s tolerance for everything that must be left out of this manuscript, but also to emphasise and celebrate the slippage between demarcated categories, and furthermore, to underscore this is not a comparative study. Although there are connections between makers, this thesis aims to use case-studies to respond to the animating research questions as opposed to score-weighting work with different genealogies, resources, and intentions. The methodology for my work is a process of separating, delineating, and distinguishing to analyse, but never fully severing the connective tissue between the works, and instead in a conceptual and critical *process* of ‘reticulation’, offering a matrixed appreciation of the works in question.

Overview of Structure

This thesis is organised around three clusters of theatre and performance activity to explore the research *problématique*: firstly, testimonial-verbatim theatre; secondly, interactive and immersive theatres; and thirdly, participatory theatre. Again, I acknowledge the problematics of genre definition, but this is an attempt to investigate the question of a human rights theatre through different conceptions and types of theatre; not just as a test of the hypothesis, but also to identify the ways each cluster situates human rights problems and where emphasis is placed – what distinct aspects ‘light up’ if we think of the radar graph discussed above. This

⁷⁹ See J. Praglowski, ‘Reticulate and Allied Exines,’ *Grana* 11, no. 2 (1971), 79-86.

⁸⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Mattumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980; 1987), 9.

structure identifies a shift in proximity, viscosity and embodiment in the move between the temperate word-conjuring of places and events through verbatim testimony which keeps both audience and story at arms-length, to immersive theatres that build up disaster worlds to foster the sensation of active witnessing. Finally, to theatres of participation that again alters relationships to site, space, and people to create modes of *sentience* through reciprocal creative acts. This thesis is not a comparative study, but rather uses these clusters of theatre types to look at a modal spectrum of ‘outside’, ‘alongside’ and ‘within’ as performance relationship types, in order to analyse the varied mechanisms of human rights theatre.

Chapter One focuses on ‘testimonial-verbatim’ as a theatrical response to human rights questions prevalent at the turn of the millennium, with the period around the ratification of the UK Human Rights Act in 1998 a particular boom time for verbatim theatre. In this chapter I focus on a central case-study of Actors for Human Rights, the outreach programme of ice&fire theatre to examine the representational, theatrical and political challenges posed by testimonial-verbatim to articulate pressing human rights issues. This chapter is an interrogation of how construction of the *mise-en-scène* in testimonial-verbatim theatre might assist conscientisation towards justice. Turning to the formal characteristics of verbatim and testimonial theatre, I investigate the problematics associated with ‘truth claims’ asserted by these forms and consider how a performative aesthetic of authenticity might present challenges to the restitutive project of human rights. In this chapter I am interested in how the seemingly ‘flattened aesthetic’ of the testimonial reading, with the processual *logos* of word-for-word recitation might formulate a *sentient* response in the audience, where felt-understanding animates spectating bodies towards a wider consciousness of human rights issues. At an ethical as well as philosophical level, I deliberate moments of testimony-giving, and their dramatisation to illuminate how practitioners negotiate inevitable distortions from

acquisition to staging, including the process of re-embodiment in the moment of performance. The chapter considers the complex matrix of interpersonal relationships between story-giver and story-receiver(s), and the response to accusations of victim exploitation in the context of a so-called ‘global political economy of traumatic storytelling’.⁸¹ This chapter also charts the rise of testimony and marks its key relationship to the development of a ‘human rights culture’, whilst paying attention to the problematics of traumatic narratives and the web of ethical stressors when these are relayed in performance.

Chapter Two looks at examples of theatre that address human rights issues by immersing their audience within a simulation of the human rights disaster event. Such works build on the long tradition of performers sharing space and light with their audiences to arrive at contemporary ideas of site-specific and immersive theatre as new locations for human rights discourse. The chapter focusses on the work of two theatre-makers; in Part One, I look at the ritualised and somatic processes of Steve Lambert and Badac Theatre, then, in Part Two, I explore the *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach of Jonathan Holmes with Jericho House. Characteristically, Lambert and Holmes attempt to foster extreme arousal within the audience, with the objective of inspiring the watcher towards ethical action. These examples illustrate a desire by the makers to prompt audiences to ‘experience’ human rights disorder, thereby activating a lasting response via an embodied mode of ‘knowing’. This chapter points towards the makers’ shared conviction that for their work to have traction, the live presence of bodies together in the same room is necessary to create an affective environment; for them, conscientisation is predicated on emotional contagion. This chapter highlights the biopolitics and ethical stresses that occur when theatre-makers try to recreate a human rights disaster

⁸¹ C. J. Colvin, ‘Trafficking trauma: Intellectual property rights and the political economy of traumatic storytelling,’ *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006), 172.

situation, where sensory stimulation can create a surfeit of *sentient* response. I also analyse the compound dramaturgical and ethical processes of co-opting audiences into performing acts of ‘witness’ for a series of disaster simulations. I furthermore examine how these recreations attempt to highlight structural responsibility for human rights violations through a consciousness-raising repositioning or illumination of the frame of the performance.

Chapter Three is interested in human rights theatre that seeks to directly empower communities and improve access to resources and the distribution of power, examining the ways in which participatory forms of theatre are used to explore and articulate human rights concerns. In this chapter I consider the contested politics of claiming economic, social and cultural rights enacted through the practice of cultural participation. This chapter is constructed around two case-studies, one focused on the young people’s theatre project, ACT NOW, run by Cardboard Citizens, and the second framed around practitioner Tony Cealy and the Black Men’s Consortium. Both case-studies foreground economic, social and cultural human rights, looking at the way in which cultural participation programmes are designed to both embed and embody rights through developing increased agency. Both case-studies investigate practice underpinned by Theatre of the Oppressed techniques which aim to engage communities in democratic dialogues through the participatory and embodied politics of Forum Theatre. This chapter begins from an understanding of audience participation as a spectrum of ‘playing actively’,⁸² leading to the construction of the ‘spect-actor’, and the substitution of the actor on stage by the audience-participant. I explore how conceptions of community typology influence the work of these practitioners, and how collective aesthetic acts begin to enable the *consciousness* necessary for human rights redress. I pay particular

⁸² Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

attention to different formulations of collective consciousness and explore the potential for transnational solidarity to be located in an ‘Aesthetics of the Oppressed’. In the conclusion I return to examine the legitimacy and viability of human rights theatre as a genre and consider the validity of the identification of consciousness as both a practice and outcome of human rights theatre.

Development of the UK Human Rights Act (1998)

The UK Human Rights Act was passed in 1998 as an adjunct to the European Convention on Human Rights. The text is unremarkable, mirroring other assorted human rights conventions, but for the Blair Government of 1997, this represented ‘Rights Brought Home’.⁸³ With the formalisation of the Act, the concept of human rights became an authoritative rationale, vital to critiquing elected government through a globally-agreed moral language.⁸⁴ To some extent, the Human Rights Act of 1998 was the culmination of a process of normalising and integrating human rights within the British system; the emergence of rights in Britain was tied as much to the history of freedoms of the ‘freeborn Englishman’ as to a sense of global solidarity.⁸⁵ Chris Moores argues that whilst the emphasis given to human rights in the post-war world had multiple routes, it was only in the late 1980s-1990s that human rights ‘became meaningful to UK citizens’.⁸⁶ Deployment of the Human Rights Act enabled campaigners to affect policy and ensure human rights finally became a meaningful category in British

⁸³ Susan Marks, ‘Rights Brought Home: The Human Rights Act White Paper 1997,’ in Susan Marks and Andrew Chapman, *International Human Rights Lexicon*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

⁸⁴ Anthony Woodiwiss, *Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2005), 32.

⁸⁵ Whilst I frame the UDHR as a seminal marker in the history of human rights, for the UK there was an extant human rights discourse articulated by Amnesty International from 1961, although, as Andrew Clapham points out, this was largely framed in relation to non-UK citizens, to gross infringement of human rights for subjects in corporeal peril under totalitarian regimes, rather than a practice intended to regulate the legal and political operations of individual nation states. See: Andrew Clapham, *Human Rights; A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

⁸⁶ Chris Moores, *Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 16.

discourse. Human rights in the UK have consequently provided an arsenal for securing and improving rights on the grounds of culture, race, sexuality and gender, but have also been charged by detractors with creating an atomised, individualist political culture.⁸⁷ Indeed, Moores cautions against reading the history of human rights in Britain as a triumph of the dominant ideological or practical framework for human rights activism of the 21st Century.⁸⁸ The Act was a response to the intransigence of right-wing governmental dominance of the 1980s, an attempt to establish a non-partisan political safety-valve; in enshrining a formal framework, the Act drew campaigning organisations towards a set of predictable, legally-binding rights and structures.⁸⁹

The expanse of the 20th Century is neatly bisected by the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, produced under the auspices of the fledgling United Nations at the close of 1948. The Declaration, commonly referred to within discussions of human rights as the UDHR, was a statement of moral intent, a set of rights and freedoms claimed on behalf of all peoples of the world.⁹⁰ The development of human rights in the 20th Century is arguably defined by the tension between protection of the sovereignty of nation states' relationships with their own citizens, and the dissemination by a quasi-federal institution (i.e., the UN) of a set of supposedly universal, inalienable rights that should be applicable to all regardless their individual membership of nation, culture, or location. The discourse has transformed from identification and justification of rights through an abstract framework to the adoption of formal positive law enacted at state and inter-state level in the protection and

⁸⁷ Woodiwiss, *Human Rights*, 8.

⁸⁸ Moores, *Civil Liberties and Human Rights*, 18.

⁸⁹ Furthermore, in many ways campaigning organisations and NGOs were better-equipped to influence elites, pursue technocratic methods of engagement and propose legalistic approaches to rights protection than to engender a wholehearted cultural embrace of human rights that was communicated to wider sections of the population.

⁹⁰ Johannes Morinsk, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 32.

proliferation of human rights. Human rights law can be seen as protecting the individual from the ‘tyranny of the majority’,⁹¹ and from the whims of ruling parties exercising edicts expedient to their regimes. The history of human rights in the modern world has reflected the ongoing dialogue between those imperilled by physical conflict, appellations for manumission and suffrage, and the philosophical discussion of rights, freedoms, and the relationships between the state and the status of man. The human rights project has gradually transferred from the preserve of philosophers to legislators and politicians.⁹² Stefan Ludwig Hoffman argues that human rights must be traced ‘diachronically and transnationally’ to understand how human rights were incorporated into their different applications which requires narrating human rights not ‘teleologically as the rise and rise of moral sensibilities but rather as the unpredictable results of political contestation’.⁹³ Consensus over these rights is often frustrated by mistrust of apparent Western hegemony overriding localised beliefs and cultural observance, but also by the implicit commitment to neo-liberalism and market capitalism in the human rights agenda, and the ringfencing of property over the equal protection of cultural and social rights. The last long century saw the illumination of the ‘small places’ of the world identified by Eleanor Roosevelt as the home of human rights. However, in recent decades concepts of locality and community have arguably been eroded, the ‘realist’ concept of the integral state exploded by technological innovation and an internationalised paradigm stretch which have all contributed to a more globalised, transnational temperament. Thus, the rights and welfare of the citizen has ceased to be a matter solely for the parent state. Correspondingly, in this thesis about human rights and British theatre, makers from the UK typically feel both morally and geographically empowered to speak of international issues. From a global perspective, alliance and partition

⁹¹ Darren. J. O’Byrne, *Human Rights: An Introduction* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003), 10.

⁹² Lawrence Friedman, *The Human Rights Culture* (New Orleans: Quid Pro Books, 2011), 19.

⁹³ Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ‘Introduction: Genealogies of Human Rights,’ *In Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

through regional conflict, the rise of reportage, globalised media and the proliferation of information, the development of transnational and supra-state organisations (whether the UN, NGOs, or huge corporate entities with significantly higher GDP than many states), and the rise of global threats, such as nuclear weaponry, terrorism, environmental degradation, or financial collapse, which are neither caused by, nor under the control of individual states, have all combined to create contemporary conditions under which the welfare of citizens is no longer concealed behind the high walls of the state.⁹⁴

For Michael Ignatieff, this imperative to look behind and beyond the ‘state walls’ amounts to a ‘revolution of moral concern’ in the West and the ‘emergence of a global conscience’ where human rights have become the dominant vocabulary in international affairs.⁹⁵ On the other hand, he suggests that this ‘atrocities exhibition’, ‘makes us voyeurs of the suffering of others, tourists amid their landscapes of anguish. It brings us to face to face with their fate, while obscuring the distances – social, cultural, moral – that lie between us’.⁹⁶ How might this, then, impact the pursuit and construction of aestheticised interpretations in human rights theatre, keeping in mind James Dawes’ assertion that all ‘human rights work is, at its heart, a matter of storytelling’?⁹⁷ Michael Galchinsky argues ‘[h]uman rights culture shares civic and ethical functions with human rights law, but while the orientation of the law is vertical, reaching down from government bodies to individuals, the orientation of rights culture tends to be horizontal, the artist appealing as a human being directly to his or her fellows’.⁹⁸ He further observes that human rights *culture* is not best associated with tangible

⁹⁴ David P. Forsythe, *Human Rights in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 75.

⁹⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto, 1998), 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid* p.11.

⁹⁷ James Dawes, *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 394.

⁹⁸ Michael Galinchsky, ‘The Problem with Human Rights Culture’, in *South Atlantic Review* 75, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 5.

outcomes, but with creating ‘structures of feeling’,⁹⁹ and that ‘human rights art seeks to cultivate rights-oriented habits of the heart’ that attempt to prevent further infractions.¹⁰⁰ In my examination of human rights theatre over the coming pages, I suggest that such horizontality in the appeal to feeling, along with the persuasion of physical presence, liveness and discursive *interruptibility* of theatre becomes an effective tool to amplify the concerns of the human rights agenda.

⁹⁹ Raymond Williams argued that by locating the actively lived ‘structure of feeling’, it is possible to retrace the lines from the past to the present, pursuing alternate but suppressed narratives – the ‘consciousness of aspirations and possibilities’ – in order to differently understand the present. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.

¹⁰⁰ Galinchsky, ‘The Problem with Human Rights Culture,’ 5.

Chapter One: The Art of Persuasion; the effect of testimony

ice&fire and Actors for Human Rights

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the capacity of testimonial-verbatim plays to operate as part of a human rights theatre, and on the qualities that enable this form to address human rights issues. I am interested in the reasons why, to quote ice&fire, ‘the real words of real people’ might find resonance in replaying egregious events and in voicing some of the most atrocious and human rights violations.¹ Moreover, I want to explore how testimonial performances animate an impossible but indispensable promise of the ‘truth’ of these violations. To illuminate these questions, this chapter focuses specifically on the performance practices of ice&fire theatre company, and on one facet of the company’s work in particular, ‘Actors for Human Rights’ (AfHR), ice&fire’s testimonial-verbatim outreach programme.² This chapter is interested in the twinning of performance and the performative; the monologic dramaturgy of AfHR is based on an assertion of fact, the authentic details of contemporary news stories resituated in the present and fragile human body. It explores the tension between finding ‘authenticity’ in the disembodied voice of the traumatised subject,³ spoken through the surrogate avatar actor, whilst recovering critical attention for the aesthetic mechanisms deployed to amplify the activist intent of AfHR production. I widen this out into an examination of the theatrical and staging choices of verbatim theatre which ‘authenticate’ the human-cost claims of testimony. This chapter investigates how construction of the mise-en-

¹ Christine Bacon, ‘Introduction. *Asylum Dialogues*’. (New Players Theatre, London. June 21, 2009).

² I follow the orthography of the company, bonding the word together in lowercase for ice&fire, and their typography of AfHR, unless I am quoting others who write out the words differently.

³ Amanda Stuart Fisher, ‘Trauma, Authenticity and the Limits of Verbatim,’ *Performance Research* 16, no. 1 (March 2011), 112.

scène in testimonial-verbatim might abet a conscientisation towards justice and human rights discourse. I am interested in how the seemingly ‘flattened aesthetic’ of the testimonial reading performance, with the processual *logos* of word-for-word recitation, might provoke a *sentient* response in the audience, where felt-understanding animates spectating bodies towards a wider consciousness of human rights issues. I argue in this chapter the testimonial work of AfHR is an art of persuasion enacted through holding *pathos* and *logos* in equipoise; animating the watcher through an appeal to human-likeness, but also retaining a structure of critical reasoning which allows evaluation of the structural determinants which permit patterns of perpetration.

The performance of first-person testimony has been recognised as a successful way of ‘asserting’ the presence and resilience of the human subject in problematic and complex global affairs,⁴ and of drawing together the *effect* and *affect* of world events in the corporeal body on stage.⁵ As I evidence in the chapter, the use of personal narrative offers a potentially powerful rejoinder for those who are excluded – overtly or covertly – from a range of human rights. Where a situation is articulated in terms of numerical groups and statistics, mired in the dense conventions of official pronouncements, and distorted by contending commentaries, first-person testimony seems to offer a corrective, reintroducing audiences to the individuals affected. Testimony invites us to think and make connections on a human-scale, with the potential to create pathways for a *sentient* reconsideration and activated to conscious redress. According to this reading, testimony permits recovery of the small subject,

⁴ c.f. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, eds., *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alison Jeffers, *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)); and Amanda Stuart Fisher, *Performing the Testimonial: Rethinking Verbatim Dramaturgies (Theatre: History – Practice – Performance)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

⁵ See James Thompson, *Digging Up Stories: Applied Theatre, Performance and War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

engulfed by transnational discourse. It can offer reparation for those denied the restorative narrative arc of a fair trial or reconciliation hearing, or the agreed historiography of a nationality, the shared memory of family, or those who have endured the radical ‘unmaking of self’ through physical torture.⁶ Testimonial theatre suggests an ethical endeavour of expanding a watcher’s socio-cultural jurisdiction. Narrative testimony as a form of bio-politics has the potential to lobby for other entitlements, (re-)inclusion into the ‘body politic’, and access to the economic, social, and cultural rights indispensable for human dignity.

ice&fire theatre company have established their mission to ‘explore human rights stories through performance’;⁷ one of the few theatre companies in the UK to name this relationship explicitly. In this chapter I deploy my proposed paradigm of ‘human rights theatre’ which satisfies three conditions: firstly, the works depict real-world political events, highlighting the role of the state in endangering its citizens; secondly, moral, and ethical ruptures are encountered within and without the drama through the dramatisation of victim/perpetrator dynamics, and finally, an aspiration to produce an activist effect on the collective behaviours of the audience.⁸ With a creative programme conspicuously featuring human rights testimonial-verbatim theatre, AfHR provide the ideal lens through which to view this framework and to consider its relevance to the research questions enumerated above. My approach addresses interrelated research foci as I explore the aesthetic, theoretical, ethical, and political issues raised by testimonial-verbatim theatre work, revealed through an examination of AfHR. To assess this work as human rights theatre, I interrogate the methodological practices, dramaturgical choices, and stylistic features which characterise AfHR scripts, as well as the processes of their conception, assembly, and performance. I

⁶ See: Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁷ ice&fire, ‘About Us,’ accessed September 14, 2014, <http://iceandfire.co.uk/about-us/>.

⁸ See the Introduction for a more complete unpacking of my proposed paradigm for a human rights theatre.

examine the political implications of the curation of diverse voices and archival sources, whilst highlighting the integrity problematics for the company in drawing near the ethical promises made by human rights articles. I consider the valorisation of ‘truth claims’ routinely made for verbatim practice, and the manifold ways in which real experiences are fictionalised and made real again in this form, and how these phenomena are manifested in AfHR’s verbatim theatre. The chapter alights on definitions of ‘theatres of the real’ (to adopt Carol Martin’s phrase) as pertaining to my central research question of a human rights theatre concerned with making connections to real-world events. This chapter refers to other playwrights and theatre-makers engaged in the use of testimony and ‘speaking truth to power’ to draw methodological and stylistic parallels in the search for a human rights theatre.

⁹ I pinpoint moments where ‘truth’ and fictional practice are fused in AfHR’s practice to articulate human rights objectives, and I explore how the company attempt this reconciliation for ‘artist’ aims.¹⁰ I examine the pared-down aesthetic of the ‘rehearsed reading’ format of AfHR’s programme to consider the *psycho/somatic* modality of their performances, and how these ‘play out’, but visually reject, the ubiquity of violent and traumatic narratives prevalent in mass-media human rights disaster reporting.

This is an interdisciplinary chapter which combines critical studies of verbatim and documentary theatre alongside trauma theory, memory studies, political theory, and juridical discourse, set within the context of autobiography and life-writing studies. I am interested in what it means ‘to testify’ and perform testimony in the context of a ‘crisis of

⁹ I am very much aware here of Noam Chomsky’s much-repeated edict ‘power knows the truth already and is busy concealing it’ (Chomsky, quoted in Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011]). Indeed, Christine Bacon echoes this sentiment: ‘it’s just that nobody is listening, the reality is that people are saying this stuff all the time. The problem is that people in power, the people who have the ability to change the situation, don’t want to hear’ (Christine Bacon, interview by Annecy Lax, July 31, 2012).

¹⁰ Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre, ‘Chicana/o Artivism: Judy Baca’s Digital Work with Youth of Color,’ (2008), in *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media*, ed. Anna Everett (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 81.

witnessing'.¹¹ As I consider the theoretical examination of testimony, I explore the impact of these discussions on the aesthetic and dramaturgical decisions for the staging of AfHR performances. I utilise the term 'testimonial-verbatim' theatre to capture the binocular purpose of AfHR's work which aims to give personal evidence of the truth of an event, and to affirm this evidence-giving is articulated using the words of the original source.¹² I concur with Stuart Fisher's delineation of testimonial theatre as a practice which combines 'ethico-political potential' with artistic autonomy, and verbatim theatre as a practice with a 'predetermined methodological approach'.¹³ However, in bonding these terms together, I also hope to capture the moments of artistry and creative autonomy evident in AfHR's verbatim scripts, consciously intended to realise the ethico-political potential of the original testimonies.

My methodology combines analysis of extant studies of AfHR, principally those of Derek Paget and Maggie Inchley, as well as extensive interviews with ice&fire practitioners, dramaturgical analysis of their verbatim scripts, and participant observation, capturing the tensions of the moments when work was being made. I conducted a longitudinal study of ice&fire from 2008 to 2018, during some of which period I worked for the company and thus got to know their processes and philosophies intimately.¹⁴ I briefly note ice&fire's background and range of activities, before moving on to focus specifically on the development of the Actors for Human Rights project which functions as an integral part of the company's outreach programme. I discuss AfHR's engagement with human rights issues

¹¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992). 1.

¹² As I shall show, AfHR pieces do sometimes use documentary sources – written and published accounts instead of the spoken form. I indicate the use of these sources throughout my discussion of AfHR and explore the coexistence of documentary and verbatim sources later in the chapter.

¹³ Stuart Fisher, *Performing the Testimonial*, 16.

¹⁴ To retain objectivity and to operate as a critical-friend, I focus mostly on periods and projects when I was least involved with the company.

and their activist intent, and the ways in which political campaigning, might be seen to affect – and in some ways determine – AfHR’s priorities and operating procedures. The substance of the chapter addresses the above research questions through a reading of AfHR’s scripts: *Asylum Monologues* (2006), *Asylum Dialogues* (2008), *The Illegals* (2008), *Palestine Monologues* (2009), *Rendition Monologues* (2009), and *Listen to Me* (2009).¹⁵ The discussion pays particular attention to *Asylum Monologues*, the company’s first and ‘flagship’ testimonial-verbatim script. This is still the most-performed script in the AfHR repertoire, and – pertinently for my research purposes - has undergone several distinct ‘updates’. This iterative accretion of text under the title of *Asylum Monologues* is indicative of the company’s responsiveness to external political events and prompts wider reflection on the (in)stability, flexibility, and modularity of AfHR repertoire. This also prompts further consideration of how makers of this kind of political theatre have evolved methodologies for longevity and sustained relevance. I also maintain that in their human rights theatre, AfHR purposefully invoke a deliberate, performative, and visual aesthetic of urgency throughout their work to reignite the fire under the public’s response to humanitarian transgression and the covalent costs to welfare, dignity and liberty, which might have gone cold in the public imagination.

¹⁵ The full list of AfHR scripts reads as follows: *Asylum Monologues*, *Asylum Dialogues*, *Palestine Monologues*, *The Illegals*, *Rendition Monologues*, *Broke*, *Seven Years with Hard Labour*, *Listen to Me*, *Getting On*, *On a Clear Day You Can See Dover*, *Even if We Lose Our Lives*, *Close to Home*, *Afghan Monologues*, *My Skype Family* and *This is Who I Am*. Only 9 of these 15 scripts are commonly available for performances. Some scripts are no longer available because they were commissioned for specific organisations such as *Listen to Me* for Save the Children, while others are now deemed problematic due to significant shifts in the political context, such as *Seven Years with Hard Labour* about Myanmar, and still other scripts cause representational challenges, such as the need for a uniformly older cast in *Getting On*. ice&fire also have several other individual testimonies and historical scripts that can be made available by special arrangement. In addition, there are many sub-versions of scripts produced, adaptations which focus on specific issues such as maternal rights for refugee women, poverty and destitution among asylum-seekers, trafficked women, etc. In total, the number of performed scripts in the AfHR canon reaches approximately 40.

Ice&fire – Sharing human rights stories

Ice&fire is a small-scale, London-based theatre company founded in 2003 with an explicit artistic policy to ‘explore human rights stories through performance’.¹ Run by Artistic Director, Christine Bacon, ice&fire combines theatre-based performance with festival work and street-theatre shows, alongside education activities and outreach in community settings. Although the idea of ‘liveness’ is central to the company’s conception of the locus of their potential *affect*, they have also produced several short films, digital exhibitions, podcasts, and mixed-media explorations. The company’s identity is indelibly tied to the ideological, political and communitarian project of human rights. They attempt to make a human reality of often distant legal and transnational edicts, where the ‘products of culture’ provide a lightning-rod of understanding.² The company’s mission statement asserts:

Through active involvement with human rights themes we creatively respond to key issues affecting our society and the world beyond. By working with a varied range of partners – arts, community and campaigning organisations – we will continue to disseminate our work to an increasingly wide-ranging audience.³

The roots of ice&fire’s methodology and performance practice are bifocal; they are grounded in psychodynamic theories of therapeutic healing and a belief in the benefits of ‘talking therapies’ and ‘writing cures’,⁴ and also motivated by political and activist instincts to create change through the conscientisation and ideological conversion of audiences and wider publics.

¹ Ice&fire, ‘About Us’. The full mission statement reads as follows: ‘ice&fire explores human rights stories through performance. We are a company with a distinct, contemporary voice creating work of excellence across our four work strands: production, outreach, education and participation’ (ice&fire, ‘About Us’). These work strands were formally articulated in this way until 2015. And here I use the British Council’s definition of ‘small-scale’, i.e., ‘less than ten company members on the road’.

² Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (New York: Polity Press, 1992), 51-52.

³ Ice&fire, ‘About Us’.

⁴ Sonja Linden, interview by Annecy Lax, August 4, 2009.

Sonja Linden initially founded ice&fire to produce her play, *I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady from Rwanda* (2003),⁵ a semi-autobiographical piece about her experience of encountering testimonies of human rights atrocities as a Writer-in-Residence at Freedom from Torture.⁶ Precepts of the healing power of story-sharing, the therapeutic encounter of speaking-out and the political persuasion of story-transmission persist not only in ice&fire's testimonial performances, but also in their programme of new plays, and their outreach work with charities such as Room to Heal.⁷ As we shall see, the act of testimony coupled with the reciprocal dynamics of witnessing informs the production and performance praxis of AfHR and is conceived by the company as the mechanism which produces the *sentient* effect of bringing audiences to consciousness about global human rights issues. AfHR characterise their testimonial theatre work as an empowering and enabling tool, intended to foreground and humanise stories of human rights violations and abuse, and to amplify the voices of the dispossessed and marginalised. In focusing specifically on the work of AfHR in this chapter, I explore the assumption underlying the company's artistic policy, namely that a certain kind of conscientisation can be best ignited through such 'talking' encounters.

⁵ *Young Lady from Rwanda* opened at the Finborough Theatre in 2003 and subsequently toured the UK before having over 30 international productions in the US and Australia. Laura Edmondson analyses this play in her essay, *The Poetics of Displacement and the Politics of Genocide in Three Plays about Rwanda* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Edmondson critiques *Young Lady from Rwanda* as a play that 'domesticates the genocide as an internal trauma to be resolved through writing' (Edmondson, *Poetics of Displacement*, 58), and asserts that, through the central character of Juliette, the play reduces the genocide 'into creative raw material for the soul-searching exile to domesticate and refine' (ibid., 60). *Young Lady from Rwanda* paved the way for Linden's second play for ice&fire, *Crocodile Seeking Refuge* which premiered at the Lyric Theatre in 2006, and *Welcome to Ramallah* which opened at the Arcola Theatre in 2008. Linden stepped back from the company in 2009 but remained an Associate Artist.

⁶ Freedom from Torture was then known as the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. ice&fire has since maintained close links with the organisation.

⁷ ice&fire have also had notable success with a range of new theatre pieces across several genres, many piece attempting innovation in form, in use of space and in mixed media, such as *On the Record* (2011), *The Nine O'Clock Slot* (2014), *The Island Nation* (2016), *Arming the World* (2017), *We Like to Move It, Move It: Just Another Immigration Variety Show* (2020). As well as issue-based plays for education settings such as *Bind* (2009), *Come Back to Me* (2010), and community participation performance projects such as *Souvenirs* (2013) and *A Trace of Me* (2016).

Testimonial plays are often created with the intention of subverting hegemonic and dominant narratives, foregrounding the ‘voices’ of marginalised subjects so audiences [re-]visit events with sensitised consciousness. In setting out the key terms for this chapter I highlight that testimony itself is performative in nature, a speech-act intended to bring forth personal and social change. The act of speaking-out aims to engender *sentience* and consciousness of the ideo-political context creating responsibility within the recipient, forming a contract of knowing that demands action. As I detail below, Derek Paget argues that a defining feature of the wave of verbatim works produced around the turn of the millennium was an ethical activation of audiences ‘bearing witness’ to the rapid escalation of shock-and-awe world events.⁸ In this conception, ‘theatres of the real’ are predicated on privileged insight into *what really happened* by means of the eye-witness account.⁹ Verbatim and testimony performances promise intimate access to human experience and a return to a felt-understanding and individuated, human-scale connection in contrast to the undifferentiated masses of humanity populating digital news reports.¹⁰ In the re-playing of testimony outside of the originating location to new listening communities, potent and persuasive stories call for agentic actors to make change on behalf of others. The wealth of critical attention on this family of works has noted the truth-claims and the promises of *truthfulness* that encircle such plays,¹¹ and the ways in which these truth-claims

⁸ Derek Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It: Docudrama on Film and Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 190.

⁹ c.f. Martin, *Theatre of the Real*.

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 19.

¹¹ See, for example, also Mary Luckhurst and Tom Cantrell, *Playing for Real: Actors on Playing Real People* (London: Red Globe Press, 2010); Forsyth and Megson, *Get Real*; Tom Cantrell, *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (London: Palgrave, 2013); Maggie Inchley, ‘Touring Testimonies: Rebalancing the Public Realm through Human Rights Activism in *Asylum Monologues* and *Seven*,’ *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 2016); Timothy Youker, *Documentary Vanguard in Modern Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2017); Jess McCormack, *Choreography and Verbatim Theatre: Dancing Words* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); James Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn* (London: Routledge, 2020); Cyrielle Garson, *Beyond Documentary Realism: Aesthetic Transgressions in British Verbatim Theatre* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021); Stuart Fisher, *Performing the Testimonial*; and Clare Summerskill, *Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

reverberate out from the stage and into the audience, with amplified ethico-political resonance – and the potential to transform the (secondary) witness into activist. As Paget asserts, in verbatim theatre, ‘the very fact that *someone has said it* adds to the power of these words’.¹²

In defining testimonial-verbatim theatre, I turn to Amanda Stuart Fisher’s contention that testimony evokes the presence of the ‘survivor’, someone who has passed through an event and returned to tell the tale. She uses Derrida’s formulation that bearing witness is not constitutively bound to the reporting of verifiable fact but rather represents the promise of a sworn word, of events endured as human experience and replayed through human presence.¹³ Therefore, in testimony, there is the profound offer of a *psycho/somatic* encounter with another human. Stuart Fisher argues that in performance the recitation of testimony generates an ‘ethico-political binding’ between audience and performer-character who become ‘politically and ethically implicated in some crucial way to this act of attestation’.¹⁴ However, as I explore below, Diedre Heddon cautions that ‘the emancipatory potential’ of using other people’s words is challenged by a proprietorial ‘act of ventriloquism’ where the rights of the speaking subject are subsumed within an appropriative project.¹⁵ For Heddon testimonial-verbatim theatre threatens to diminish the indigenous agency of the testifier and the authority of the testimonial project.¹⁶ In thinking about the performative qualities of testimony, I concur with Couser’s proposition that the testimonial ‘I’ has the capacity to stand in for the collaborative ‘we’;¹⁷ however, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest, parsing

¹² Derek Paget, ‘Acts of Commitment: Activist Arts, the Rehearsed Reading, and Documentary Theatre,’ *New Theatre Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2010), 187.

¹³ Stuart Fisher, *Performing the Testimonial*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵ Diedre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 129.

¹⁶ See Carol Martin, ‘Bodies of Evidence’, *The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 8-15, for more on how this process operates.

¹⁷ Thomas Couser, ‘Making, Taking, and Faking Lives: The Ethics of Collaborative Life Writing,’ *Style* 32, no. 2 (1998), 340.

the spoken ‘I’ into its means of production enables us to uncover the ‘asymmetries of power, privilege and reading publics’.¹⁸ This crucible of thought frames the analysis of this chapter.

Actors for Human Rights

Actors for Human Rights operates as a *de facto* independent operation within ice&fire, reflecting that this was an established project imported to the UK by Christine Bacon from her native Australia.¹⁹ Bacon describes AfHR as ‘converting grassroots activism on human rights themes into an artistic movement’.²⁰ Its philological flag is one of ‘artivism’, where socio-political benefit is perceived to accrue through the introduction of artistry as a complementary path to activism.²¹ As I argue here, artistry also offers the promise of *sentience*, a felt-understanding of the context and consequence of cause and effect. The AfHR network was founded in 2005 and uses live performance of gathered testimonies to create a three-dimensional human archive and human rights story repository. The performance of verbatim testimony by AfHR is intended to introduce audiences to politically complex issues and the intersectional difficulties faced by marginalised groups; to make space for under-represented voices. AfHR’s work is predicated on the insistence of liveness in performance, and a drive to ‘responsibilise’ those who hear the stories. In the attention demanded by an actor’s presence, the audience’s *sentience* is activated. Audiences are presented with

¹⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ‘Witness or False Witness?: Metrics of Authenticity, Collective I-Formations, and the Ethic of Verification in First-Person Testimony,’ (2012), in Smith and Watson’s *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader* (Ann Arbor, MA: Michigan Publishing, 2017), 94.

¹⁹ Bacon helped to set up the theatre organisation Actors for Refugees alongside Alice Garner and Kate Atkinson in Melbourne in 2001. Actors for Human Rights was initially called Actors for Refugees in the UK from 2005-2009. In a close link to AfHR, included in their mission statement was ‘Our actions will primarily target community attitudes, to complement the work of political lobbyists trying to effect change and that of refugee organisations providing information, funds and services’. Although Actors for Refugees Australia ceased operation in 2007, it provided a blueprint for the ice&fire outreach model that Bacon brought to ice&fire 2005, after a meeting with the other co-directors of ice&fire, Sonja Linden and Sara Masters.

²⁰ Christine Bacon, interview by Ancey Lax (August 27, 2015).

²¹ Sandoval & Latorre, ‘Chicana/o Artivism,’ 81.

‘evidence’ of how they are networked into the social and structural matrices that enable human rights abuse. Maggie Inchley highlights the stimulation of ‘accountability’ through ‘attending to the presence of others’ within such verbatim encounters, and how this accountability ‘actively infuses audiences through listening and dialogue with a sense of shared commitment to humanitarian values and actions’.²²

AfHR perform short, ‘stripped-down’ plays as ‘rehearsed-readings’, in a range of settings, most often in non-designated theatre spaces.²³ The plays are ‘read’ so rehearsal time can be minimised, production costs reduced, and portability retained, and – as I argue throughout this chapter – to telegraph the authenticity and artefactual quality of the testimonies. The pieces are performed to human rights networks, faith-group meetings, schools and universities, pubs and festivals, in public sector offices, and community spaces – sometimes to audiences politically sympathetic to the ideological perspective of the company, sometimes intentionally to unsympathetic audiences. Bacon states clearly that the performances are ‘nakedly campaigning’, but also offering the prospect of ‘entertainment rather than political debate’ to draw in a far wider public.²⁴ Bacon describes their approach as follows:

Because we use a rolling cast of actors who donate their time and have no technical requirements, we can provide a ‘rapid response’ event for whichever organisation asks us to turn up. We normally perform in churches, village halls, pubs and lecture rooms – anywhere we’re invited, really.²⁵

²² Inchley, ‘Touring Testimonies’.

²³ Ice&fire, ‘Production: *On the Record*’, accessed 11 February 2010, <http://iceandfire.co.uk/production/on-the-record>

²⁴ Sumerskill, *Creating Verbatim Theatre*, 168.

²⁵ Christine Bacon, ‘Blog: Theatre can and should tackle the issues of the day,’ last modified, November 26, 2008, accessed November 04, 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2008/nov/26/political-theatre>.

These pieces typically serve as an attempt to advance a normative socially-liberal and left-wing consensus on human rights issues, supporting philosophies that are communitarian, anti-imperialist, ‘Alter-globalist’.²⁶ The company are discernibly motivated by a belief in a form of transnational progressive morality, a globalised duty of care, and by the need to uphold the ‘positive’ human rights²⁷ – the ‘soft’ economic and social rights, as well as ‘statist’, structurally-embedded civil and political rights – through global legal instrumentality and judicial redress. Performances are commonly part of larger, extra-textual events which invite wider engagement with the issues under discussion. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue, human rights stories ‘issue an ethical call to listeners both within and beyond national borders to recognize the disjunction between the values espoused by the community and the actual practices that occur’.²⁸ Even when the testimonies relate to originary events experienced ‘beyond borders’, the consciousness-raising work of AfHR seeks to bridge that distance and recalibrate proximity between the abused subject and a listening audience.

The AfHR project strives to engage audiences with the complexity and challenges for victims of human rights abuse, and to promote a broad understanding of the ways human rights as a conceptual and political practice are pertinent to all our lives. From the first outing with *Asylum Monologues* in 2005, AfHR now have ten core verbatim pieces in their repertoire, many of which I use to explore points of discussion. The working model for AfHR is that professional actors donate their timeto read the company’s testimonial scripts, with the network currently numbering around 700

²⁶ ‘Alter-globalisation’ or ‘Alter-*mondialisation*’ is a social movement that supports global cooperation and interaction, but which opposes the negative (capitalist) effects of economic globalisation, advocating instead cooperative ways within the free-market to promote values such as environmental and climate protection, economic justice, labour protection, protection of indigenous cultures, and human rights.

²⁷ Positive rights, therefore, are rights that provide something that people need to secure their wellbeing, such as a right to an education, the right to food, the right to medical care, the right to housing, or the right to a job.

²⁸ Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.

members²⁹. The AfHR Outreach strand was intended to complement ice&fire's programme of fictional human rights plays, sharing source material, so thematically-related verbatim accounts could inform and enhance the creation of new theatre work.³⁰ This was conceived as a symbiotic relationship; in the event, the proliferation and ubiquity of the hyperphagic AfHR product has outstripped the rate of ice&fire's other work. AfHR's plays are typically constructed from source material derived from interviews conducted by members of ice&fire, sometimes augmented by published life-writings, official reports, journalism, and narratives sourced from the public record. AfHR's work commonly focuses on urgent issues with time-critical dependencies (a policy might be under review, or new information has emerged that could change the political position or human rights infraction). Acknowledging categories examined later in this chapter, AfHR refer to their product variously as 'verbatim', 'documentary', 'testimony', 'personal accounts', as well as incorporating the truth-claiming vocabulary of 'first-hand accounts', 'true stories', 'witness accounts' and 'word for word stories'. This flexibility of terminology frames a set of campaigning objectives, truth claims, representational rules, aesthetic choices, and connections with the history/ies of documentary and verbatim theatre. AfHR occasionally qualify their phraseology in a way that further smudges formal parameters, using terms like 'testimony-based' drama, or drama 'with personal testimony at its core'; and as I proceed to investigate, sometimes they even dismiss their work as 'not really theatre'.³¹ To help situate this analysis of AfHR as human rights 'theatre', I now turn to my recollection of an early performance to set the scene for the reader.

²⁹ Actors are always paid their expenses for participating; if the performance is for a large organisation or commercial operation, where the testimonies might be considered 'training' as much as consciousness-raising, then AfHR will charge a fee for the actors. The AfHR project is not-for-profit with central operating costs usually funded by external grant giving bodies.

³⁰ When ice&fire sought funding for the inaugural Actors for Refugees programme in 2005, the stated aim was to create two integrated products under the title of *Asylum Monologues*: 'the first will be a 45-minute (maximum 1 hour) highly tourable, generative, economical production, which will not need rehearsal and can be mounted according to a formula without much preparation; the second, a theatrical work in its own right, rehearsed and directed, driven more by story and character than awareness raising and education' (iceandfire, 'Outreach: Actors for Human Rights', 2010). As it turned out, the verbatim script *was* made, while the dramatic fiction was never produced. On the other hand, the later original play *Welcome to Ramallah* (2008) and AfHR's *Palestine Monologues* (2008) shared the same source material and were made according to the earlier methodology.

³¹ Christine Bacon, interview, (2009).

Watching Monologues

In late 2009, Amnesty International³² hosted four weekly performances of AfHR scripts at their London headquarters, a mini-season entitled ‘September Monologues’ to reflect the testimonial, sustained speech-after-speech monologue format of the AfHR plays.³³ I am at a performance of *Palestine Monologues* by Sonja Linden on September 17, 2009, in a packed hall alongside 250 audience members who have come to hear these uncompromising stories from across the contested territories. The ceasefire in the Gazan War of 2008-2009 had officially been called on January 18, 2009, but with humanitarian observation limited in Gaza, the true costs of the conflict were still being calculated throughout that year. These monologues were being performed before the UN Mission had concluded their findings, and whilst the narratives in *Palestine Monologues* did not have the evidenced authority of an official report, they added detail to the record at a time when there was a dearth of information.³⁴ On the bleacher seats there are strategically-placed programmes and leaflets, including previous audience feedback which asserts, ‘[t]ales such as these, told in the words of those who experience the injustice, remind you of how powerful theatre can sometimes be’.³⁵ Christine Bacon takes the stage before the actors, and in a characteristic outer-textual performance welcomes the audience to the event, describing the play as an ‘intimate look [at] the day-to-day experiences of life under Israeli occupation’.³⁶ Bacon emphasises the courage shown by the interviewees who put their stories on record. She urges us to listen carefully to

³² AfHR have produced other performances in partnership with Amnesty International (AI) since 2006; their first ever outreach play *Asylum Monologues* was launched at AI’s Human Rights Action Centre in October that year, and a shared constituency of support has steadily grown between the two organisations ever since.

³³ The season included performances of *Rendition Monologues*; *Palestine Monologues*; *Asylum Monologues*; and *Seven Years with Hard Labour*.

³⁴ I recognise the partiality of AfHR’s *Palestine Monologues* here, but also note the political contestation over, for instance, the 2010 Goldstone report, wherein initial findings of war crimes and human rights atrocities by *both sides* of the conflict were later rescinded by Goldstone after complaints from the Israeli Government – to the protests of the report’s co-authors.

³⁵ Ice&fire, ‘Outreach: *Palestine Monologues*,’ last modified 2008, accessed 15 January 2010, <http://iceandfire.co.uk/outreach/scripts/palestine-monologues>.

³⁶ Christine Bacon, ‘Introduction. *Palestine Monologues*,’ The Human Rights Action Centre, Amnesty International, London. September 17 2009.

every word of these testimonies. '[B]ut don't despair' she says brightly, navigating the tension between the emotional and political frame, the affective and effective worlds: 'we're going to tell you all about how you can help after the show'.³⁷ Bacon introduces the actors who file onto the stage to the mellifluous and evocative sound of an oud played by a live musician. They solemnly take up their seated positions on box seats; the lights dim, and the actors open their black folders. Noof Ousellam raises his head from the printed text, surveys the audience and begins to speak. *Palestine Monologues* opens with testimony from Israeli soldiers gathered by the campaigning group Breaking the Silence, and, via stories from the Al-Am'ari refugee camp, ends with testimony taken by Linden from an Israeli anti-expansion activist, himself the son of an Auschwitz survivor.

Campaigning for the Rights of Refugees

Actors for Human Rights was originally called 'Actors for Refugees' for the first four years of the project, a title that reflected the focus of the earlier work. Sonja Linden, herself a beneficiary of organised asylum routes from Germany during the horror of the Shoah,³⁸ states her aim in establishing ice&fire was quite specific: 'this was the opportunity to provide information against the misinformation about refugees given to the general public' in Britain.³⁹ As Darren O'Byrne notes, 'the experiences of refugees and displaced persons raise particular issues and concerns in matters pertaining to human rights, citizenship, and racism'.⁴⁰ The twentieth century witnessed unprecedented numbers of displaced people

³⁷ Christine Bacon, Introduction. *Palestine Monologues*. 2009

³⁸ In my interview with Linden, she described her commitment to asylum-seekers as a self-promise to avoid the role of bystander, and as a 'British Mischling Jew' whose German parents migrated/escaped to the UK in WW2, demonstrating an identification of kinship and solidarity with the exiled and displaced – 'I think it probably must have played a significant role in my empathy, and my feeling that "refugee" is not a negative word for me, whereas it is for so many people; I was brought up with that word as being normal' (Sonja Linden, interview with Anney Lax, August 4, 2009).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Darren O'Byrne, *Human Rights: An Introduction* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003), 338.

seeking refuge around the world, and saw legal mechanisms established for the first time to regulate the flow of refugees and offer some protections for their treatment. Much of this new legislative activity followed the horrors of World War II, the specific persecutions of the Holocaust, and the disruption to settled civilian populations of Europe and Asia through genocide and state terror. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the establishment of the UNHCR the following year, together with the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and its 1967 Protocol, all emphasised the protection of the rights of refugees and the displaced. Key Articles of the UDHR guarantee the right of everyone to ‘the freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state’, the ‘right to leave any country, including his own, and to return’, the ‘right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution’, the right ‘to a nationality’, and that ‘no-one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality’.⁴¹ The specific vulnerabilities of people in exodus were extremely present to legislators framing the UDHR in the aftermath of world war, and their needs are deeply embedded in the document. The issue of asylum-seeking has been contentious ever since. New diaspora communities arriving in the UK are often treated with suspicion and resentment by public and media alike.⁴² The protectionist paradigm of ‘this sceptred isle’ as a fortress immune from ‘infection’ emboldens many in the UK to declare that the country is over-crowded, ‘closed’ to asylum-seekers, and allows demagogues to stoke resentment of outsiders and new arrivals.⁴³ The so-called ‘migrant

⁴¹ UN General Assembly, ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ (Paris: United Nations, 1948). In all, UNHCR estimated the total of various categories of displaced people at ‘more than 79.5m worldwide’ in 2019 (UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019* (Copenhagen: UNHCR Global Data Service, 2020), or almost 1% of the world population, including 26m cross-border refugees and nearly 46m internally displaced. These figures compare with the estimated 214m international migrants (that is, persons born in a country other than that in which they now live, either voluntarily or not) throughout the world, according to the UN Population Division.

⁴² The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, asserted in 2015 that the British media had a history of ‘decades of sustained and unrestrained anti-foreigner abuse, misinformation and distortion’ (Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, ‘UN Human Rights Chief urges U.K. to tackle tabloid hate speech, after migrants called “cockroaches,” (New York: OHCHR, 2015). last modified April 24, 2015, accessed January 1, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/displaynews.aspx?NewsID=15885&LangID=E>).

⁴³ William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Stanley Wells (London: Penguin, 1987), 2.1.40-45.

crisis' (in the UK and worldwide), perhaps more than any other globalised interchange, troubles the concept of the nation state.

ice&fire Artistic Director, Christine Bacon, is frustrated by the hostility that often greets asylum-seekers, angered by the corrosion of earlier international promises to assist the displaced. Bacon also vehemently believes Britain has a post-colonial responsibility to diasporic groups, particularly those from regions historically exploited by the UK. As T.J. Coles notes, acidly: 'Britain's got talent at creating refugees'.⁴⁴ In response to British society's failure to recognise its responsibility towards fellow human beings in peril, Bacon conceives AfHR as a mechanism to hear the 'totality of someone's story', and for 'people make their own judgements' which belies the campaigning intentions of the work but emphasises her beliefs in the power of storytelling.⁴⁵ Bacon believes an extended encounter with refugees' testimonies, replete with agonising personal decisions and details, is to make the subjects 'as human and as rounded as possible'.⁴⁶ The purpose of AfHR is 'to make people see complexity, make them see all the variables involved' in an individual's decision to seek asylum.⁴⁷ Bacon trusts the long-line of human life stories will rewrite the soundbites and challenge oversimplified and fearful definitions of 'the other'. Ultimately, the hope is that intolerant behaviour towards forced migrants will be revised as a result of deeper understanding, to 'presage the imagining' of more positive 'possible futures'.⁴⁸ Throughout this chapter, I analyse mechanics of allowing audiences to 'make their own judgements' in response to testimonial and verbatim theatre, and the *persuasion* encoded in such acts of conscientisation. Bacon sees the plays of ice&fire and AfHR as actively offsetting the

⁴⁴ T.J. Coles, *Human Wrongs: British Social Policy and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Alresford, Hampshire: Iff Books, 2018), 65.

⁴⁵ Christine Bacon, interview with Annecy Lax (July 31, 2012).

⁴⁶ Christine Bacon, interview with Annecy Lax (July 31, 2012).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Schaffer and Smith, *Human Rights*, 18.

hostility shown towards refugee communities, rewriting political scripts of dehumanisation, challenging narratives of ‘criminality’ to reveal those of survival and resilience. As Paulina, an undocumented migrant, dryly observes in the opening of the AfHR play, *The Illegals*, ‘I am challenging community cohesion’.⁴⁹ In making *The Illegals*, Bacon felt she had a duty to challenge hostility, but also to add complexity and nuance to notions of the ‘righteous refugee’,⁵⁰ that had arguably ossified in earlier work like *Asylum Monologues* (wherein migrant subjects become Spivak’s ‘pious items’⁵¹), offering instead a more complicated portrayal celebrating migrants as ordinary people, flawed-yet-deserving, challenging instrumentalist ideas of migrants as simply economic units, permissible only if they contribute to the national GDP. For Sonja Linden, the foundation of ice&fire itself was an artistic counterpoint to the cultural neutralisation of the stranger, where vocabularies of violence on the one hand, and ‘tolerance’ on the other, pressurise migrants to assimilate quietly. Linden believes the rich polyglossia of stories once told and shared allows for an understanding which can challenge national hegemonic discourse.⁵²

The catalogue of AfHR scripts reflects an unerring focus on issues which have become touchstones of their work: the politics of forced migration; the rights of refugees; unregulated detention and removal of asylum seekers.⁵³ The portable AfHR performances of ‘true stories’ conveyed from another place mirrors the multiple settings and performances of human rights testimony-giving. The template of AfHR productions embodies and dramatises

⁴⁹ Christine Bacon, *The Illegals* (unpublished text, 2009).

⁵⁰ Bacon, Interview (2015).

⁵¹ Gayatri Charavorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York : Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994), 104.

⁵² Linden describes the power of this kind of storytelling as follows: ‘it is this “drip, drip, drip” thing, not just through drama, but in talking informally and telling, sharing stories, and the personal encounter that cannot fail to have a huge impact on people’s attitudes towards asylum-seekers and others marginalised by the system’ (Linden, interview [2009]).

⁵³ Alongside plays exploring these ‘first generation’ civil and political rights, parent company ice&fire have ranged more widely, commissioning scripts that examine the ‘second generation’ of economic, social and cultural rights, and ‘third generation’ rights related to environmental, developmental and community concerns⁵³.

the ‘cultural proliferations’ and ‘affective sites’ of NGO publications and campaigns of activist groups.⁵⁴ The September Monologues season at Amnesty International described above followed this template closely: all performances were accompanied by panel discussions with a range of expert speakers – field workers, legal specialists, case workers – doubling the credibility of the script, lending kudos to the campaign. Ice&fire has forged reciprocal links with numerous human rights organisations,⁵⁵ and their proximity to the third sector reflects an ability to (re-)present issues of rights and social justice to engaged and conscientised audiences. Despite the ascendancy of AfHR in the company’s portfolio, ice&fire nevertheless also remain committed to pursuing critical appreciation for their output of new plays and experiments with theatrical form. This situation has established a tension – and an opportunity for interplay – between the aesthetics of activism and their drive to make ‘good art’ that illuminates human rights issues through a ‘less didactic’ methodology.⁵⁶ Since early 2009, the project’s remit has expanded to include human rights issues more broadly defined, and to incorporate a more oblique address to the issues of displacement and diaspora prominent in their original mandate.⁵⁷ As ice&fire enters its third decade, they continue to update this vision-statement, but in recent years they have attracted ever-closer scrutiny both for the quality of their product, and their aesthetic and dramaturgical choices,⁵⁸ but also for the ethics of their approach to the acquisition of source material, and some of the initial presumptions behind their political aims, with critics pointing to an apparent

⁵⁴ Schaffer and Smith, *Human Rights*, 51.

⁵⁵ Partner organisations include Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reprieve, Save the Children UK, Peace Direct, Index on Censorship and Refugee Action

⁵⁶ Bacon, interview (2012).

⁵⁷ Bacon’s solo scripts for the company are *Rendition Monologues* (2009), *The Illegals* (2009) and *Broke* (2009) *Even if We Lose Our Lives* (2010) *Afghan Monologues* (2011) and *My Skype Family* (2014). Interestingly, the latest AfHR script, *This is Who I Am* (2017), was ‘presented by ice&fire’ but had no individual authorial attribution.

⁵⁸ Ursula Canton misconstrues the range and purpose of ice&fire’s output when she identifies their ‘self-imposed restriction to only produce documentary plays’ in her work *Biographical Theatre: Re-Presenting Real People?* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 47. In truth, the company have resolutely pursued new theatre styles and forms in their productions, commissioning various early-career writers to work on projects to make ‘theatre people wouldn’t normally associate with human rights’ (Bacon, interview [2015]).

‘infantilising [of] victims to fulfil a saviour complex’.⁵⁹ Likewise, Maggie Inchley argues, ‘the stories that emerge from their interviews can sometimes enforce dominant disciplinary discourses’.⁶⁰ Also relevant in this context is James Thompson’s cautionary interrogation of underlying assumptions about the significance and succour of sharing stories: ‘by asking to hear, must we retell? Can stories be owned; can stories be stolen? Do we judge the truth of one story against another?’.⁶¹ This chapter now considers some of these provocations in relation to AfHR, drawing upon the theories of testimony and witnessing to contextualise the programme’s campaigning objectives where responsibility to the story demands a balance between identification and distance, between activism and ethics.

Bearing Witness and the Contested Role of Testimony

For AfHR, the life-narrative is a keystone practice in understanding ‘the neighbour’, where experience has the capacity to be transferred, restoring an ability to witness and therefore a reconnection to our humanity.⁶² Personal revelation is valued as a form of benediction: working from a belief that providing testimony stories for wider sharing is both a therapeutic event for the individual, and a tool for social restoration. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub identified the twentieth century as the ‘age of testimony’⁶³. Testimonies which recount systematic violations of human rights and mass atrocity – war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide – have been the subject of varied and proliferating forms of acquisition and re-staging since the end of World War II. This marks a cultural turn away from official

⁵⁹ S.E. Wilmer, *Performing Statelessness in Europe* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁶⁰ Inchley, ‘Touring Testimonies’.

⁶¹ Thompson, *Digging Up Stories*, 25.

⁶² See Emanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, Sean Hand (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 110-118, for a fuller elaboration of this idea.

⁶³ Felman and Laub, *Crises of Witnessing*, 201.

history-telling towards witness and survivor accounts extracted from private individuals. The ‘venues of storytelling’⁶⁴ in which these testimonies are circulated include official reports and handbooks, accounts of tribunals and trials such as Eric Stover’s *The Witnesses* (2005) about the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague; edited collections of verbatim testimony like Jean Hatzfield’s compendium of survivors’ accounts from the Rwandan genocide (*Life Laid Bare*, 2006), online video archives; social media fora⁶⁵; documentary video archives such as those described by Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker (*Documentary Testimonies*, 2009); and the testimonial theatre forms discussed by Amanda Stuart Fisher, among others. With the mechanisation of both print and warfare, and the growth in rapidity of transmission of both news and of the methods of dehumanisation, there has developed a discernible public appetite for testimony, and an imperative to document and record traumatic personal experience. At root, all these forms offer the prospect of a meeting, and all carry the injunction that ‘the victim’s word can no longer be doubted’⁶⁶. As a result, an infallible, ‘charismatic victim’ has gained prominence and ‘become the normative basis for dealing with past atrocities’⁶⁷.

This emergence can be traced in part to the judicial response to the Holocaust. While the International Military Tribunal for Major War Criminals at Nuremberg (1945-6) relied on documents, the personal testimonies of surviving victim-witnesses were central to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 for ‘crimes against the Jewish people’⁶⁸. The Israeli

⁶⁴ The phrase is coined by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith in ‘Venues of Storytelling: The Circulation of Testimony in Human Rights Campaigns’, in *Life-Writing*, 1, no. 2 (2004): 3-26.

⁶⁵ Online video archives such as voicesofrwanda.org; sfi.usc.edu and social media fora such as www.humansofnewyork.com

⁶⁶ Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 29.

⁶⁷ Thosten Bonacker, ‘Global Victimhood: On the Charisma of the Victim in Transitional Justice Processes’, *World Political Science* 9, no. 1 (2013), 101.

⁶⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006), 6.

prosecutor's decision to place witness testimony at the heart of a 'testimonial theatre'⁶⁹ that would 'reach the hearts of men'⁷⁰ transformed the way the Holocaust has been remembered and commemorated. Hannah Arendt characterised the Eichmann trial as the primal retelling of 'tyranny and oppression'. The uncovering of the genocidal horrors metered out in World War II motivated the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) where the world's recent enculturation into 'barbarous acts' was redirected through human rights discourse into an imperative to guarantee the security and freedoms of 'common people'. The Eichmann hearing – in contrast to the closed purges of Stalin's rivals during the late 1930s – introduced a 'theatrical' and structural dynamic that would come to characterise subsequent 'show trials' and reconciliation processes in the post-war era. In turn, this 'staging' effect began to pervade modern forms of 'truth-based' or verbatim drama, directly influencing Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* (1965) and Richard Norton-Taylor's *The Colour of Justice* (1999), also inflecting the mise-en-scène of Blank and Jensen's *The Exonerated* (2000) and Christine Bacon's own AfHR plays. Understanding the Holocaust not only as an historical event, but specifically as the product of the testimony of witnesses and survivors, the Shoah has come to be characterised by 'a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify'⁷¹. 'Narrative interiority', it was assumed, would evoke empathy in ways that exterior reportage could not⁷². With Holocaust trials bequeathing paradigmatic templates for the contemporary 'Era of the Witness', the Eichmann hearing also 'codified and systematised the collection and dissemination of testimonies which now

⁶⁹ Michael Bachmann, 'Theatre and the Drama of Law: A 'Theatrical History' of the Eichmann Trial', *Law Text Culture* 14 (2010, Law's Theatrical Presence), 109.

⁷⁰ Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv: Herzl Press, 1967), 291.

⁷¹ Annette Wieviorka and Jared Stark, *The Era of the Witness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 391.

⁷² Michael Galchinsky, 'The Problem with Human Rights Culture', *South Atlantic Review* 75, no. 2 (2010), 9.

routinely follows widespread violence or crisis⁷³, whether in the service of International Criminal Court trials for mass atrocity⁷⁴, human rights reporting⁷⁵, or in testimonial theatre⁷⁶.

While the performance of testimony is common across various fields of human rights campaigning, in journalism, international criminal law, and social justice arts⁷⁷, there are also important distinctions within and between these modes of activity which produce different textual dynamics and registers of persuasion and reflect their different operating environments. The immovable coordinates of a legal hearing is a deliberately encoldened setting compared to the reproduced iconography of a conscientizing survivor-as-emblem human rights campaign, and the [re-]presentation of sentient avatar bodies in testimonial theatre. Reflecting on the proximity between AfHR and several third-sector agencies, it has, however, been argued such testimony-acquisition has become the defining feature of a parasitic ‘Human Rights Industry’ or ‘Human Rights Empire’⁷⁸. According to this reading, organisations operating in this space routinely exploit the affective-to-effective capacity of testimony and the testifying subject subsequently becomes ‘hostage to changing currencies in campaigns for human rights and social justice, and the volatility of compassionate and humanitarian emotions that move a witnessing public to feel sorry’⁷⁹. This version of the Human Rights ‘Industry’ relies on a salvationist discourse rooted in a Eurocentric civilising

⁷³ Nigel Eltringham, *Genocide Never Sleeps: Living Law at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 11.

⁷⁴ See Kieran McEvoy and Kirsten McConnachie, ‘Victims and Transitional Justice: Voice, Agency and Blame’, *Social & Legal Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013): 489-513.

⁷⁵ See Schaffer and Smith, ‘Venues of Storytelling’.

⁷⁶ See Olivera Simic, ‘Breathing Sense into Women’s Lives Shattered by War: Dah Theatre Belgrade’, *Law Text Culture* 14, no. 1 (2010): 117-132.

⁷⁷ Lawyers use testimony from human rights campaigns; testimonial theatre uses courtroom transcripts; human rights bodies commission testimonial theatre-makers.

⁷⁸ Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013), 109.

⁷⁹ Gillian Whitlock, ‘Sorry Business’, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights*, eds. Sophia A McClennan and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 207.

mission which reinstates an ‘international hierarchy of race and colour’⁸⁰ by reproducing essentialist and disempowering caricatures that threaten to obscure individual biography⁸¹. On the other hand, it has also been suggested this, and other such critique, threatens ‘paralysis’⁸² in the collection and re-staging of testimony when there are social and ethico-political goals in sight. The latter perspective certainly reflects Bacon’s recognition of the instrumentality of her own work with AfHR: ‘there’s a certain point when you’ve got to stop all this talking, hand-wringing’ she asserts, ‘I just think about the things I want to change, then I know I’ve work to do’⁸³.

In *The Juridical Unconscious*, Shoshana Felman argues that ‘a trial is presumed to be a search for truth [but] technically it is a search for a decision’⁸⁴. Testimony, meanwhile, as a narrative form or aesthetic category, is a more fertile, plural entity, which expands what it means to adjudicate. ‘Art brings [us] closer’, Felman advances, ‘we needed art—the language of infinity—to mourn the losses and to face up to what in traumatic memory is not closed and cannot be closed’⁸⁵. Elsewhere, Felman depicts the act of bearing witness as inherently performative and creative⁸⁶. Testimony is configured as a practice of enactment and re-presentation; to testify is to vow to tell, to promise information and revelation. It is to bear

⁸⁰ Makua Mutua, ‘Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights’, in *Harvard International Law Journal* 42 (2001), 207.

⁸¹ See Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011). One example of such critique is presented in Sylvie Bovarnick’s paper on the comparative violence against women in non-Western systems: ‘when examining women’s rights in the world, human rights agencies have launched campaigns to publicise the manifestations of violence against women, which works in the broad context, to purposely (over)simplify the construction of a predominant victim/aggressor narrative, which gives rise to crude and culturally inapplicable solutions’ (Sylvie Bovarnick, ‘Universal human rights and non-Western normative systems: A comparative analysis of violence against women in Mexico and Pakistan’, in *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 1 [2007], 59-60).

⁸² Julie Salverson, ‘Taking liberties: A theatre class of foolish witnesses’, *Research in Drama Education* 13, no. 2 (2008), 253.

⁸³ Bacon, interview (2012).

⁸⁴ Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 55.

⁸⁵ Felman, *Juridical Unconscious*, 202.

⁸⁶ Felman, ‘Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching.’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 17.

witness to oneself and to produce dramatically one's own speech as material evidence for the truth about 'acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference'⁸⁷. Testimony holds the prospect of both informing and conscientising others of lived experiences elsewhere, thus forging a path towards *self*-consciousness – a reunion of the fragments of identity for the subject testifying – and political consciousness for the listener. Both Felman and trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, suggest the performance of testimony is produced in intimate co-production with the act of listening as a shared and dynamic process where personal experience is made dramatically real through recollection. The creation and framing of auto/biographical utterance is an inherently intertextual, contextual, conditional, reflexive, and unsettled act, based on a repertoire of partisanship. Indeed, the process and product of self-expression through testimony and other forms of life-writing can be seen as a negotiation with the subjective, but in this 'age of testimony', it is also a pursuit of *sentience* through another's experienced insight, offering the relief of congruence found within the intersubjective site. As Marlene Kadar elucidates from a feminist perspective, testimony includes many 'non-literary' elements, which challenge the pre-eminence of authoritative written accounts, and ultimately of history-writing. For Kadar, incorporating the relational dynamics of spoken forms, as found in witness statements and interview testimony, offers a counterpoint to a 'previously silenced self' which has been 'rendered in text at the margins of an otherwise hegemonic discourse'⁸⁸. Likewise, Gayatri Spivak argues that – distinct from autobiography – 'testimony is the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other'⁸⁹,

⁸⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁸ Marlene Kadar, 'Recording a Life and the Construction of Self: Non-Literary Life Narratives as Life Writing - Personal Oral Narratives, Life Histories and Testimonials', *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 81. Kadar is referring here to court testimonies, and although more interrogative, this does provide an analogy to the interviews conducted by AFHR, often with subjects who have escaped dangerous conditions and whose testimony can place them in a perilous position.

⁸⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and Circumfession', *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*, eds. Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 1998), 6.

highlighting the political dynamics expressed in the exchange and the need for radical modes of ethical care in listening. This theoretical analysis reminds us to always situate testimony contextually, and to be alert to the multiple identities owned and expressed by those providing spoken accounts.

In considering the phenomenology of personal testimony, and particularly the presentation of testimony in verbatim performance, I therefore identify a polyvalent and co-produced ‘truth’ constructed dynamically within the testimony moment or event itself, which is the product of shifting interactions between teller/speaker and listener/audience. The need to maintain an aporetic approach to testimony is noted by Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, who argue that ‘the perpetuated practice of witnessing [...] is neither accidental nor innocent in the context of contemporary politics’⁹⁰. Similarly, Laura Marcus argues that the instrumental, political power of bearing witness may be dispersed in the increasingly prevalent notion of mass accountability expressed through a globalised metaphor of witness: ‘This shift [...] from the self-consciousness of autobiography (which may conceal a cultural demand for confession) to the ethical responsibility to testify [...] would seem to entail a move away from self-reflection towards a sense that we are all witnesses of history’s tragedies’⁹¹. On the other hand, Felman and Laub describe the solitary *responsibility* of witness and testimony: ‘to bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude’⁹². In this reading, the expectation of bearing witness can be both isolating, yet ultimately empowering: ‘an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, *to speak for others* and to others’⁹³. The global accretion of

⁹⁰ Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.

⁹¹ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 200.

⁹² Felman and Laub, *Crises of Witnessing*, 2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

testimony evokes the responsibility to ‘the archive’ proposed by Jacques Derrida which raises ‘a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility *for tomorrow*’⁹⁴. The ethical responsibility to testify, and thereby to condemn atrocity, this empowering act in defiance of social isolation and expurgation, is therefore in tension with the conception of testimony as a costly donation from the sub-altern or traumatised subject. I suggest that the act of re-placing testimony *within* the art-form and inside the art-event, especially within a human rights context that reflects the utopian ideals of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by asserting the ‘inherent dignity’ of all subjects, offers the capacity to reconcile some of these competing responsibilities.

Spectacular ‘survivors’

Psychologist Dori Laub describes the cognitively disruptive effects of genocide and how they problematise the credibility of witness accounts, even if they do not challenge the credibility of the witness herself. Laub, a survivor who subsequently listened to many Holocaust witness testimonies, points to the psychic rupture of identity, stability, and order that accompanies genocide: ‘not only did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims’⁹⁵. Giorgio Agamben similarly pointed to the ontological fallibility of bearing and being a witness, challenging the validity of their role in attributing ‘guilt, responsibility, innocence, judgement, pardon’⁹⁶. For Agamben, the witness

⁹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago; London : The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

⁹⁵ Felman and Laub, *Crises of Witness*, 80.

⁹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Princeton, NJ: Zone Books; Princeton University Press, 1999), 17.

to atrocity must inevitably be partial, since their experience has placed them outside reason and outside *juris*. In this sense, they have lost consciousness. Witness-survivors inevitably have a subjective view which renders them incapable of operating as an effective judicial witness by providing empirical truth. Agamben argues this ‘essential lacuna’ means that witnesses to the impossible, become impossible witnesses: ‘The Shoah is an event without witnesses in the double sense: one cannot bear witness to it from the inside of death and from the outside since the outside is excluded from the event’⁹⁷. Agamben delineates a valuable taxonomy of witness, including the participant-witness and the eye-witness bystander. For my purposes, I extend this to include the secondary witness of the testimony-receiver, who may be configured as the interviewer, theatre-maker, or the audience. However, Kelly Oliver suggests an intertwined definition of witnessing as containing both ‘the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen’⁹⁸. Alison Jeffers distils this duality by claiming witnesses, ‘do not simply articulate a demand to be seen, nor are they bearing witness in that they are recounting what they saw, but they are also bearing witness to the *process* of bearing witness - a process through which, it is suggested, they were enabled to survive’⁹⁹. This thesis argues that the aesthetic framework created in human rights theatre, though sometimes imperfect, allows a restitution to this witnessing, and in demonstrating its own framework also announces that very impossibility.

The figure of the survivor is a recurrent tocsin in human rights theatre, and yet the word of the survivor falters across the lacuna, the gap between signifier and signified that cannot be bridged in speech, in writing, or by any other aesthetic means. The survivor falls

⁹⁷ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 35.

⁹⁸ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 16.

⁹⁹ Alison Jeffers, ‘Looking for Esrafil: Witnessing ‘Refugitive’ Bodies in I’ve got something to show you’, Forsyth and Megson, *Get Real*, 95.

within a category of ‘incredible’, defining those who have existed in a realm beyond our ken, their bodies and voices a somatic totem of the ability to endure. I argue the role of survivor, placed centre-stage in the discourse of human rights, becomes cardinal to drama seeking to recover ‘human truths’; their presence is otherworldly because of the seeming impossibility of their return, and the embodied potency of this presence enables a *sentient* response to the abuse of their human rights¹⁰⁰. The spectacle of the survivor may be reconstructed as an instrument for political activism, appearing as spectral relic from another world who stands or speaks as evidence of wrongdoing elsewhere. Fittingly, the survivor figure recurs throughout the plays of AfHR, their charismatic voices demanding our attention:

Actor 1: “Why? Why does this happen to us?” We are not criminals. We are people just like anyone else, only we don’t have homes. Our country is not safe. We had to escape. We had to flee our homes,

Actor 2: In Iran.

Actor 3: In Afghanistan.

Actor 4: In Iraq

Actor 1: We had to survive¹⁰¹

Primo Levi argues that part of the mechanism of survival in the face of horror is the will to assert that, ‘[e]ven in this place one can survive, therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization’¹⁰². In this way, for survivors themselves, the ‘guilt’ of survival can be transposed into the empowering activity of bearing witness.

The (re-)performance of testimony to assert human rights offers a way of reconnecting the frenzied atrocity exhibition of history with the human figure at its centre, an

¹⁰⁰ This valorisation of the survivor is explicitly invoked by US playwright Lynn Nottage, who in the endnote to her play *Ruined* says: ‘The women felt it was important to go on record, which is why my play is not about victims, but survivors’ (Nottage, *Ruined* [London: Nick Hern Books, 2009], Afterword).

¹⁰¹ Sonja Linden, *On a Clear Day You Can See Dover* (London: Wilton’s Music Hall, 2011).

¹⁰² Primo Levi, *If This is a Man; The Truce* (London: Abacus Books, 2004), 9.

opportunity restore comprehension, for witnesses and audiences alike to emerge *sentient* and *conscious*. The objectives of AfHR are explicitly to use personal testimonies to give back agency to the ‘voices of the marginalised, displaced and dispossessed’¹⁰³. This speech act, although marked by socio-cultural shaping, nevertheless affords access to the way an individual mind responds to traumatic lived experience. The utilisation of the personal words of testimony is intended to reveal and amplify the horrors and inhumanities of human rights violations. At the opening of *Asylum Monologues* we find the following evocation of storytelling:

Germain: Tonight (today) we want to share with you our stories.

Marjorie: What happened to us in our countries.

Germain: The reasons we had to flee.

Faith: And what happened to us when we arrived here

Germain: Where we hoped we would be safe

Marjorie: Protected

Faith: Given asylum¹⁰⁴

However, the act arguably becomes less spontaneous through repetition and rehearsal of the story. For many testifiers there is an effect of distancing achieved through repetition which enables the traumatic to be spoken aloud, and even to become a performative habit.

Analogous to the pre-trial conference of a legal setting, the ritual rehearsal of testimony is intended to affirm the testifier’s autobiographical identity, and to shape and enhance the clarity and potency of their story. Many of the interviewees with whom AfHR work have provided their stories on multiple occasions: to border authorities, police, psychiatrists, or social workers; indeed, many are identified as the owner of a powerful story precisely *because they have told it before*¹⁰⁵. People in this position eventually come to be known as

¹⁰³ ice&fire Theatre, ‘Outreach: About Outreach’. Last modified January 1. Accessed February 16, 2010. <http://iceandfire.co.uk/outreach/about-us/>.

¹⁰⁴ Linden and Bacon, *Asylum Monologues*.

¹⁰⁵ For the three speakers in *Asylum Monologues*, AfHR’s first Outreach play, we can chart a degree of rehearsal and retelling of their stories: Germain was interviewed by Bacon after she saw him provide his testimony at the

‘professional witness[es]’¹⁰⁶ who are politically motivated to testify both for themselves, and for the hidden multitudes unable to have their voices heard. This challenges AfHR’s stated mission of airing ‘stories that are often passed over or ignored’¹⁰⁷, since some of their interviewees have in fact already achieved significant vocal agency. Indeed, testifiers for AfHR are often relatively agentic. However, as I argue throughout this chapter, gifting stories for performance speaks to a shared distribution of the responsibility for creating social change amongst a wider audience. The aim of AfHR plays is that listening to these stories will provide a conscientisation for UK citizens, the revelations of living-subjects (or their avatars in the form of AfHR’s company of actors) will develop a *sentient* response in the audience which opens them to an ethico-political consciousness of the responsibility to recognise the human rights of others. I argue in this chapter that this consciousness is generated by the interplay between the artefact of witness testimony and the persuasive surrogate of the present human body within the theatre performance. Such sustained encounters restore personal detail and recognisable human scale to incomprehensible global atrocities and unheeded quotidian violence alike. The effect of the staged encounter is then extended into a discussion space made possible by the value-making, community-building process of the play. It is further hoped this *sentience*-to-consciousness response will be converted into action outside the theatre event. In so doing, AfHR are required to navigate tensions between these ideological-political aims and the attendant suspicion that, by deploying the disturbing content of survivor narratives to effect real-world change, they objectify these testimonies as evidential apparatus, endangering the agency of their subjects,

Independent Asylum Commission in early 2008; Marjorie was interviewed by Bacon when they met at a Women for Refugee Women meeting in 2007 (Marjorie has also participated in The Testimony Project with a video re-narration <http://www.testimonyproject.org/testimonyprojectuk/video/marjories-video-testimony>); and Olive was interviewed by Linden in 2007, after the former had worked with Pavilion Productions on the piece *Woman’s Place* in 2003/04 which explored the experience of woman refugees in the UK.

¹⁰⁶ Schaffer and Smith, ‘Venues of Storytelling’, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Ice&fire, ‘About Us’.

and risking reinscribing precisely the marginalised status they campaign vehemently against. With this theoretical framework established, I now turn to analyse AfHR's production methodologies.

AfHR: Staging Human Rights

The AfHR arm of ice&fire, with their short, sharp verbatim theatre methodology, and compact, contained aesthetic, can mobilise performances promptly, responding to developing news stories of human rights transgression, or to community requests. AfHR testimonial plays aim to fuse the subjective 'truth' of verbatim scripts with the documentary credibility of field work and on-the-ground reporting, all wrapped in consciousness-raising extra-textual discussion. The plays tend not to exceed a one-hour running time, and are usually presented as enhanced 'rehearsed readings', sparingly choreographed for a cast of four or five performers. The scripts are characterised by long, interleaving monologues, modelling the sustained speech of testifiers during their original interviews, interspersed with shorter blocks of speech which evoke an extended meeting between the characters, allowing human-features to solidify. In theorising 'monodrama', Nikolai Evreinov, claimed that onstage dialogue 'relegated' the audience to 'curious eye-witnesses', whereas the intellectual investment required to watch monologue was an opportunity for 'the spectator' to "co-experience" along with the active participants'.¹⁰⁸ Lynne Truss concurs, arguing that the monologue 'is literally "im-mediate", in that there is ostensibly no mediation: nothing intervening between the character and the audience'.¹⁰⁹ However, Paul Castagno sounds a note of caution, describing the monologue as transactional, rather than interactive, with an 'inherent

¹⁰⁸ Nikolai Evreinov, 'Introduction to Monodrama', *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 184.

¹⁰⁹ Lynne Truss, 'World of Interiors', in *The Guardian*, May 3, 2005, 50.

resistance to interruption or disruption’, and elements that are static and planned; monologue ‘knows where it is going, either in intent or ideology’.¹¹⁰ AfHR scripts demand of the audience a similar psycho/somatic commitment to singular perspective(s).

Typically, the actors will have no more than half a day’s rehearsal together and, in some cases, may not see the script until the day of the performance. For most AfHR performances, there are no adornments, save those which signal the piece’s ‘unadorned’ credibility. The actors wear blank versions of their own clothes, although for more prominent performances they might wear the ‘costume’ of matching black t-shirts. The actors may occasionally take their seats to the accompaniment of suitably atmospheric music¹¹¹, but as AfHR largely perform in non-designated theatre spaces, most pieces are delivered without amplification and in stark overhead lighting. The opening section of the text is sometimes learned and spoken from memory; otherwise, the actors *read* the script from uniform black folders. Although I acknowledge that all these features amount to a pared-down aesthetic, I also argue that these recurrent staging choices reflect a ‘creative’ decision to echo the mise-en-scène of other testimonial sites. Moreover, the carefully constructed *performance* of reading serves to complicate Bacon’s comments that AfHR performances are ‘not really theatre’.¹¹² Across the compass of her work as Artistic Director of ice&fire, Bacon does not dismiss the artistic merits of more traditional, fictional theatre production, but for her the comparatively time-consuming development of a conventional play, and the rituals around designated theatre spaces, represent obstacles to the efficient communication of the message.

¹¹⁰ Paul Castagno, *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century*. (London: Routledge, 2012), 197.

¹¹¹ Music is a recurring interest for the company; the initial conception of *Asylum Monologues* and the run of *Rendition Monologues* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2009 included live musicians, while *Palestine Monologues* regularly incorporates an oud player.

¹¹² Bacon, interview (2009). I shall return to the effect of these creative decisions about the aesthetic of AfHR performances later on in the chapter.

For Bacon, the testimonial-verbatim performance form of AfHR offers a portable campaigning platform: ‘The main objective is to get people to respond, to engage with these stories, as many people as possible over a long period of time’¹¹³ she asserts, her instrumental calculations of campaigning conditioning the company’s output, ‘opinions won’t change by doing one production in a little theatre somewhere’.¹¹⁴

A key precept of the AfHR model is that scripts are never ‘finished’: they remain unstable entities with global developments written in, new endings added, and testimonies swapped in and out to alter the inflection of each iteration of the piece. The script of *Asylum Monologues* has been revised and renewed many times; Bacon counted over 30 distinct iterations¹¹⁵. Beyond the expected tinkering with a new playscript, AfHR scripts are frequently updated to ensure the currency and relevance of content; amendments to UK immigration detention laws in 2018 meant that new testimonies for *Asylum Monologues* were taken from inside Yarl’s Wood and Harmondsworth. Such textual changes also ensure the script’s continuing relevance to unfolding political events, with ‘asylum’ stories from refugees fleeing war-torn Syria incorporated into *Asylum Monologues* from 2012. As contributors’ circumstances change, the scripts can be altered accordingly. Marjorie’s reunion with her daughter in the UK was added, for instance, while other contributors might ‘call up to say I’ve got a new house, or a new job, or I’ve got indefinite leave to remain’.¹¹⁶ Thus, the AfHR script is always provisional, a proposition which can assimilate shifting migration patterns and changes to asylum law, while also challenging evolving public prejudices. At times, this also means that testimonies which the company promised to safeguard and disseminate are side-lined. The story of Rwandan refugee Olive was ‘retired’ from *Asylum*

¹¹³ Bacon, interview (2012).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Bacon, interview (2015).

¹¹⁶ Bacon, interview (2012).

Monologues in favour of the testimony of whistle-blower Louise Perrett, an ex-Border Agency employee. Bacon was sanguine about this alteration: ‘the political situation in Rwanda is much more stable now. There are other issues which deserve attention. Besides Olive has moved on. She’s less interested in being associated with her story these days’.¹¹⁷ Although this response emphasises the instrumentalist handling of testimony, it also makes clear the process sometimes requires an ethical letting-go, which recognises the right of those providing testimony to be forgotten or to forge new identities. The company has also developed specific versions of scripts like *Asylum Monologues* for different constituencies, reworking the text to highlight the lack of access to medical care, for example, or maternity care for women in the asylum system.¹¹⁸ Amending and reshuffling in this way can also allow new stories from refugee groups under-represented in the usual discourse to emerge, along with different perspectives within the asylum system. In customising their verbatim scripts, the company aim to make direct connections with the different communities in which they perform.

If the script of *Asylum Monologues* is designed to be fluid and modular, with capacity to evolve, performances retain a level of consistency and legibility through the ‘events’ surrounding them. In fact, the majority of AfHR performances are flanked by pre- and post-textual, or ‘extra-textual’ events; petitions, campaign literature, and information sheets are provided listing the pro-active steps audiences might take after the performance.¹¹⁹ These

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Other examples of context- or time-specific additions to the same script focus on the experience of children in the asylum system, destitution among asylum-seekers, or male survivors of sexual violence in conflict overseas. Many of the resulting ‘single-issue’ pieces are commissioned by charities and other third-sector bodies to align with specific campaigns or dates – the children’s *Asylum Monologues* was made in conjunction with the Child Poverty Action Group, for example. However, testimonies taken specifically for these versions of the text might find their way into the main iteration of the text performed, such as ‘Faith’s’ testimony in *Asylum Monologues*.

¹¹⁹ AfHR typically produce accompanying literature headed ‘10 Things You Can Do’ ranging from assisting with media monitoring, to volunteering for relevant charities, to booking another AfHR performance. This approach is in alignment with other campaigning organisations such as International Alert.

extra-textual trappings are deemed crucial; as Linden suggests, ‘a post-show discussion is so important, instead of everybody running off into the night. We are very frightened of, not alienating exactly, but brutalising the audience, and that’s why there has to be something hopeful, positive after’.¹²⁰ Despite Linden’s protestations, I would contend that AfHR performances are at least partially intended to ‘brutalise’; the testimonial revelations are presented in such a way as to induce psychic disruption in the audience, and to animate their activist response. The post-show discussions can be understood as decompression chambers, moving the audience’s shocked and sensitised *sentience* into an active consciousness that might motivate them to challenge the injustices recounted. For Linden, these events were conceived as opportunities to engender reflection and reconciliation, and encourage a self-navigated path through the issues, whereas for the more pragmatic Bacon this extended dispersal phase is an opportunity to ‘get people to commit to change’.¹²¹ The composition of the audience inevitably impacts the direction and content of the post-show discussion; at times, it is revitalising for the company to perform for an audience ideologically aligned to the issues, whereas occasionally, the extra-textual events can be combative. Performing *Asylum Monologues* before workers at the UK Border Agency in 2011 led to a volley of interrogation about the authenticity of the testimonies which extended the post-show event by an hour.¹²² By contrast, after a performance of the same script at the Kingston Quaker Centre, the discussion focussed on intervention and assistance, and an appreciation of the company’s promotion of the issue.¹²³ Where an audience is supportive of the human rights norms adopted in the plays, these discussions can act as an efficacious method not only to reintroduce human-level detail and bonds of *sentient* care, but also to validate the response of

¹²⁰ Linden, interview (2009).

¹²¹ Bacon, interview (2009).

¹²² Bacon, interview (2015).

¹²³ This particular performance, which I also attended, is analysed adroitly by Maggie Inchley in ‘Touring Testimonies’.

engaged practitioners, arming them against wider hostile political narratives, as well as conscientising those on the peripheries of the campaign towards action.

After some stagings, the actors themselves are warmly thanked for acting *on* the issues, rather than for acting *in* a performance. In these moments of transference, members of the audience offer help and solace to the actors, who receive hugs as their avatar bodies are conflated with the absent bodies of the characters portrayed. As Ursula Canton reflects after viewing *Rendition Monologues*, this sleight-of-body effect may be deliberate:

hearing testimony of people ‘like them’, people made of flesh and blood, the audience are more likely to transfer basic human qualities, such as the capacity to feel pain, onto them. As a result, the distance between spectators and characters will be reduced and the effect of dehumanisation... becomes minimal.¹²⁴

Thus, the bodies of the actors become a proxy site for the accounts of torture and brutality described in *Asylum Monologues* and *Rendition Monologues*, an act of transference which intensifies the audience’s encounter within the event. I suggest that for engaged audiences, criticising such performances on aesthetic grounds would veer too close to a rejection or disavowal of the content of the testimony. During the post-textual events, discussion is more often focussed on humanitarian action than on the theatrical performance. That said, AfHR performances have sometimes attracted open and vocal criticism *within* the post-show discussions,¹²⁵ with Bacon being angrily accused of ‘prostituting’ and ‘puppeting’ the people who provide their testimony.¹²⁶ However, my interpretation of one such interchange is that the audience-member was keen to signal their protectivity towards the actors *as* their

¹²⁴ Canton, *Biographical Theatre*, 49.

¹²⁵ I want to make a distinction here between criticism that occurs during the post-show discussions, and the academic and journalistic critique of AfHR’s work which I note elsewhere.

¹²⁶ Bacon, interview (2012).

characters; the legacy of the testimonies of trauma was still redolent on the actors' bodies, arousing suspicions that the actors on stage were themselves being manipulated to relive trauma, as opposed to being understood as 'secondary-witnesses' to the originary event, who nevertheless carry a trauma-narrative burden through the process in the act of re-performance.¹²⁷

AfHR: Performing testimony

AfHR, 'which began as a merry band of ten professional actors',¹²⁸ currently lists approximately 700 actors on their books.¹²⁹ The cohort range from luminaries of the acting world to younger, early-career practitioners, some of whom are committed activists while others are eager to use the pliable entry criteria to boost their acting CVs.¹³⁰ Stephen Wilmer might overstate the situation in contending that 'Ice&fire often choose actors for their celebrity status as a means of attracting an audience' but in my own observations of the performances, I propose the 'celebrity' of a given actor might seem to compete with the credibility of the testimonies.¹³¹ Although he ultimately endorses the project, *Times* journalist

¹²⁷ There is, of course a rich vein of discussion about manipulation in theatre, but I am particularly interested here in the polyvalence of the term 'manipulation', which can mean both to coerce and to handle, as well as the etymology of 'to have in one's hands', which also carries the potential connotation of an ethical holding, an act of supervision rather than duplicity.

¹²⁸ Bacon, 'Voice for the Voiceless,' 27.

¹²⁹ Bacon highlights the core of performers who operate within this potential cast of hundreds: 'There are people that are more engaged than others.... There are about 50-60 I would say, who are really the core members who have done loads of readings and are real ambassadors, not just for the network, but for the issues themselves and are very keen to talk about them as well as perform' (Bacon, interview, 2012). In my own experience, actors tend to be close to the network for a limited period of time, perhaps then only working on 'gala performances' – there is the sense of a 'shelf-life', which some actors attribute to becoming 'overly-familiar' with the texts.

¹³⁰ Simon Callow, Juliet Stevenson, Shobu Kapoor, Romola Garai, Louise Jameson, Simon Amstell, Daniel Mays, Ery Nzaramba, Maya Sondhi, are some of the actors that have performed in AfHR pieces who already have recognition for other cultural products on film and television.

¹³¹ S.E. Wilmer, *Performing Statelessness in Europe*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 95.

Brian Logan wrote wryly about the association of Simon Callow with AfHR's *Broke*, a script which portrays the complexities of homelessness and poverty in the UK:

What do you feel when you hear that Simon Callow is to star in a staged-reading of true-life testimonies of poverty and homelessness? You have a more bountiful heart than mine if your reaction isn't tinged with certain weariness. Theatre as social work. Hand-wringing sob stories of seen-it-all-before. This time, with celebrity endorsement!¹³²

I asked Bacon how she managed to integrate Callow's 'celebrity status' into the play, and acknowledging his value to the overall campaign, she responded simply: 'it just got more people to come, basically'.¹³³ When pressed on the interruption that a stand-out persona such as Callow's might create in an audience's connection to his character, 'Michael', Bacon was emphatic in her response:

Yes, Simon Callow's performance was quite markedly different to everyone else's - because he's bloody good... There was this collective audible gulp on stage when he opened his mouth, the other actors just going, 'oh shit, you have just raised the bar'... He was so compelling.¹³⁴

Bacon never asks performers to enter into what Carol Martin describes as 'hypernaturalistic mimesis' observed in some performances of verbatim or testimonial plays, where there is not only replication 'of the words of different individuals, but their bodily style as well' in a parallel of the 'spirit doctors' who 'channel' their subject targets.¹³⁵ But longstanding AfHR performer, Helen Clapp, does use shamanic language when she describes herself as a

¹³² Brian Logan, 'Homelessness is where Simon Callow's heart is,' *The Times* (February 2, 2009), accessed August 27, 2009,

http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/article5619981.ece.

¹³³ Bacon, interview (2015). This piece was commissioned and funded by Trust for London, a charity looking at ways to reduce the impact of poverty in London.

¹³⁴ Bacon, interview (2015).

¹³⁵ Carol Martin, 'Anne Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You,' *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*, ed. Carol Martin (London: Routledge, 1996), 185-186.

‘conduit’ in performance, seeking to convey the testifier’s ‘emotional footprint’ through her performance,¹³⁶ while actor Yusra Warsama’s conception of her process is of ‘letting the person walk in front of her’.¹³⁷ This aligns with fellow actor Bhawna Bhawsar’s remark that she imagines the person’s ‘hand on her shoulder, standing next to me’.¹³⁸ Bacon uses similar positional language in her direction to suggest that AfHR performances require coalition rather than immersion, and that the actors should imagine themselves: ‘standing beside, not inside, not in front of, but bearing witness for somebody that cannot be there themselves’.¹³⁹ Maggie Inchley observes the ethical restraint required of the actors who must resist interpretation; in its place, she posits the idea of ‘emotional sinking’, a humanitarian act of recognition where the ‘actors speak empathetically with rather than *over* interviewees as they mediate their words to audiences’.¹⁴⁰ I contend that this entangling of exteriority, cognisance and ‘emotional sinking’ is the embodiment of *sentience*, a felt-understanding that combines affect with the purview of effect. In rehearsal, Bacon will often recall how the person behaved while giving their testimony, asking the actors to embody these cues, ‘rather than telling them this is what you should do, you’ve got the interpretation entirely wrong, what you say instead is, “actually when I spoke to him, he thought this was quite funny” and they go, “oh really, that’s interesting”, and they think “Oh wow, this person is real”’.¹⁴¹ Bacon’s practical advice to the actors is that they should lean into their craft and technical skill as trained communicators who understand the potency of language and can give clear voice to a hidden constituency: ‘I bloody love actors. A good actor is a miraculous thing. I wasn’t one of them. Actors who are committed to what they do – I need them’.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ Inchley, ‘Touring Testimonies’.

¹³⁷ Warsama, interview by Anney Lax (May 1, 2011).

¹³⁸ Bhawsar, interview by Anney Lax (May 1, 2011).

¹³⁹ Bacon, interview (2012).

¹⁴⁰ Inchley, ‘Touring Testimonies’.

¹⁴¹ Bacon, interview (2012).

¹⁴² Bacon, interview (2015).

One directorial note Bacon consistently gives to the actors is to ‘really listen’ to the other actors on stage, self-consciously performing the act of listening in order to create reciprocity between the characters on stage, but also to model focus for the audience, and thereby to ‘finally give this story the attention it deserves’.¹⁴³ There are, in fact, multiple and matrixed modes of listening that occur in verbatim theatre over the duration of story collection, transcription, rehearsal, and performance. Moreover, I argue here that listening is an act of *attendance* in testimonial theatre as evinced through AfHR: to be present, but to be in service – and not just in service of an external project, or the transmission of knowledge, but also in acknowledgement of the worth and weight of the other. AfHR interviews and performances aim to be a mutual process, a co-creation which can render the other’s particular truth a tangible object in the world, something that will be felt. In this way, the other’s truth becomes an affective effect: an article of faith in the purpose and place of other human beings.

To date, across all the productions of *Asylum Monologues* and *Asylum Dialogues*, with the cast rotating each time, there have been over 350 different ‘Germaines’ and over 350 ‘Marjories’. 300+ actors have voiced Marjorie’s intimate traumas, and 300+ distinct bodies have testified to Marjorie’s suffering, hopefully animating sensate feeling through their playing of the witness. Bacon extols the virtues of confounding expectations of specific bodies enacting these monologues, emphasising that the play’s content is intended to stand as educe to revived compassionate and politicised behaviours among the audience:

The concept of *Asylum Monologues* is not about seeing a Black person, it is about the stories and can you put yourself in their shoes? This could be anybody, this could be you, this could be somebody you know. This is not about saying this only happens to

¹⁴³ Bacon, interview (2019).

Africans. I find with *Asylum Monologues*, if you cast to type, it makes it an issue about foreigners, an issue about over there, rather than something we can engage with here.¹⁴⁴

Bacon reports that on occasion she will know exactly who to cast after her interview with the real-life subjects, based on ‘a look’, a physical body type, a sense of energy or spirit, or a similar sense of humour. The casting of AfHR plays reveals something of the process of personification in verbatim theatre, with physical types and racial echoes sometimes deployed to convey to the audience a sense of the re-location and cultural heritage of the subject-characters. Bacon maintains that casting ‘depends on the show and the context’. In the case of *Asylum Dialogues* she emphasises she likes to, ‘cast to type’ because the piece is about unlikely meetings and ‘pairings’ of people from different backgrounds and experiences brought about by the asylum process, and ‘you have to see that visually, because that’s the concept of the piece’.¹⁴⁵ When AfHR productions do ‘cast to type’ this will often entail inserting a Black British actor to play an Eritrean, a Jamaican, a Zimbabwean, no matter what their own ethnic heritage might be. In AfHR performances Persians stand in for Arabs, Bengalis for Indonesians, Latin Americans for Burmese. What Bacon means by ‘casting to type’ therefore reads as ‘casting for colour’; despite the huge political, economic, geographical, and cultural differences between the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa and the Caribbean, one Black body is often required to stand in for another. The assumption seems to be that, regardless of such geographical specifics, a UK audience will read their Blackness as authenticating the story. Of course, an actor’s practice typically requires standing in for another body, to play at being someone else, and therefore this act of re-placement is not unique. I contend, however, that from a Fanonian perspective, there are issues of *colorism* in

¹⁴⁴ Bacon, interview (2019).

¹⁴⁵ Bacon, interview (2015).

play:¹⁴⁶ the bodies of a white/black/dual heritage actor and a Black actor are not synonymous.¹⁴⁷ Equally, when white actors read Marjorie, it raises the suspicion of an expropriation of pain which transcends the ventriloquist problematics of ‘speaking for others’.¹⁴⁸ As I further explore in Chapter Three, such acts of substitution by AfHR fail to acknowledge that the treatment to which Black bodies are commonly subject would likely not be meted out to white bodies with the same consequences. As Lynette Goddard summarises, Black bodies are more ‘susceptible to inequitable treatment, open hostility, harassment and state violence’.¹⁴⁹

The most brutal evocations of violence are not generally re-staged in AfHR plays, in contrast to the case-studies in the next chapter; as in Classical Greek tragedy, the worst violence happens elsewhere. However, although the archival nature of the remembrances of testimony are further distanced by the mediation of the substitute body reporting through the cooling *logos* of language – there is subtle violence in the representational vocabulary of AfHR. Blanket western modalities and forms of performance are deployed to articulate and characterise the diverse cultures and voices referenced in the testimonies.¹⁵⁰ There is a privileged cultural hegemony and univocality of delivery that arguably perpetuates subjective violence by subsuming individual voice, threatening to negate the unique identity of the other(s) portrayed. This is not the universality or indivisibility the human rights project intended. Instead, de-limbed from the original expressive body telling the story, the re-

¹⁴⁶ Carla Monroe, *Race and Colorism in Education* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 80.

¹⁴⁷ I acknowledge that many of the Black actors in AfHR are cognisant of these complex politics and representational issues, but they often persist with the project because they feel an ethical duty to speak up for the most oppressed, and to honour their debt to the migrations made by their own parents or grandparents.

¹⁴⁸ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 129.

¹⁴⁹ Lynette Goddard, ‘#BlackLivesMatter : Remembering Mark Duggan and David Oluwale in Contemporary British Plays,’ *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 6, no. 1 (2018), 85.

¹⁵⁰ Leslie Wade, ‘Sublime Trauma: The Violence of Ethical Encounter,’ *Violence Performed*, eds. Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, 18.

embodied stories told by AfHR can seem over-simplified or reified by generalised gestures and acting norms shorn of cultural significance and nuance. As a result of the staging choices of AfHR plays, the expressiveness of the moving and responsive body is effectively muffled, replaced by an aesthetic of stillness – static actors confined to their stools, hands locked to the script artefacts.

AfHR occasionally utilises the appearance of the ‘real-life’ testifiers during post-textual events, creating further laminations of performance and meaning from the presence of testifier and actor on the same stage. One example is Germain Naruhana, who supplied his testimony for *Asylum Monologues*.¹⁵¹ Naruhana is a Congolese citizen detained without trial and tortured, his family brutalised and dispersed, for his role in organising an anti-government demonstration, who testified that after his father was beheaded by state agents he was forced into exile. Naruhana lost track of the whereabouts of his wife and children for three years, concluding in the grimmest of news when his testimony reveals: ‘Soldiers came to interview my mum about my whereabouts. She got angry at them, so they beat her, raped her and then shot her dead. Then my wife was taken hostage with my children as bait for me to come forward’.¹⁵² In a postscript to this litany of tribulations in *Asylum Monologues*, Naruhana’s announcement during an after-show discussion that he had finally been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain raised an emotional cheer from the assembly. He epitomised the spectacularised survivor. The effect of his appearance drenched the audience, intensifying the *sentience* generated by the performance. The presence of the real person seen talking to his actor-avatar self, prompted observers to attain consciousness in comprehending the real-

¹⁵¹ Naruhana had previously given his testimony to other campaigning organisations, including the charity, Solace, before he provided an interview to ice&fire. He was a seasoned political campaigner, who eventually moved to Australia to join family members in 2012 and has since undertaken a number of professional roles supporting refugees; at the time of writing, he is a Senior Case Manager for Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Trauma and Torture Survivors in Australia.

¹⁵² Linden and Bacon, *Asylum Monologues*.

world causes and consequences of displacement and the ill-treatment of refugees. Bacon described the response to this amplification of the real, which she has seen multiple times, as the actor meets the subject during the post-textual event, in her recollection of a similar occasion when the real-life Burmese subjects joined the actors on stage after a performance of *Seven Years with Hard Labour*:

I think for any actor, the experience of meeting the person they are playing is going to be a remarkable one, it's a once-in-a-lifetime... experience [...] It was a really special moment when the real people came up on stage afterwards and they were so happy about the portrayal. It was just that reinforcement that this is real, that these people are real, and they are ordinary people just like you and me, but look what they have been through and they are here to tell the tale.¹⁵³

AfHR: Theatrics of campaigning

There is a discernible tension in the work of AfHR between the imperative to maintain a stripped-down form that dispenses with frippery in order to signal credibility and urgency, and the deployment of the focalising and feeling devices of 'theatrical' vocabulary. For AfHR, this is reflected in a performative parlay between the ideals of art and activism, extending into the cultural-political space the company occupy. When I interviewed Bacon initially in the summer of 2009, she was looking forward to the prospect of taking her piece *Rendition Monologues* to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. This was part of a drive to widen the audience base for AfHR, from groups of activists to more general theatre audiences who might not be familiar with the mechanics of state-ordered disappearance and extraordinary rendition. Her ambition for the longer term was that *Rendition Monologues*, and the AfHR output as a whole, should become 'more complex and ambitious in terms of staging'.¹⁵⁴ She

¹⁵³ Bacon, interview (2015).

¹⁵⁴ Bacon, interview (2012).

professed to relish the opportunity for more rehearsal time, for some sections of the script to be learned, and the role of live musicians expanded. However, Bacon insisted that *Rendition Monologues* would retain the cultural values and representational vocabulary of typical AfHR dramaturgy: ‘it’s not about theatrical spectacle, it’s not about the big dramatic things you might look for in a traditional theatre piece, it’s about listening to the words, and having them clearly communicated to you’.¹⁵⁵ This reflection suggests a desire for AfHR scripts to be *just theatrical enough* to satisfy the plays’ multiple purposes and audiences. AfHR performances are built on an aesthetic intended to evoke urgency, credibility, truthfulness and a lack of artifice or ‘artfulness’. I argue the AfHR programme has developed a theatre-activist aesthetic designed to complement ice&fire’s mandate. The company has evolved a characteristic approach to scripting, stage-craft, casting, and performance locating it among other exemplars of ‘verbatim theatre’ which promise privileged access to a reality that calls for our attention and action. As briefly mentioned above, the output of AfHR is often characterised as ‘rehearsed-readings’, or ‘readings of documentary scripts’, or ‘semi-staged readings’, with these works variously described as ‘plays’ and ‘performances’.¹⁵⁶ Most companies are lexically flexible in terminology across myriad outputs, but in this case the fluidity of terminology evinces a recurrent negotiation – and unease – with the ideas of ‘theatre’ and ‘performance’ in AfHR.

Derek Paget, in the context of his wider mapping of over half a century of documentary and verbatim theatre,¹⁵⁷ suggests that ‘to critique Documentary Theatre as art is

¹⁵⁵ Bacon, interview (2012).

¹⁵⁶ Ice&fire, ‘Outreach: Actors for Human Rights,’ accessed January 4, 2010, <http://iceandfire.co.uk/outreach/>; Bacon, ‘Voice for the Voiceless’; Bacon, *Rendition Monologues*.

¹⁵⁷ Paget’s research was part of a UKRI funded three-year project entitled ‘Acting with Facts: Actors Performing the Real in British Theatre and Television production since 1990’.

possible but can be unhelpful'.¹⁵⁸ However, I argue that this masks some of the deliberate *artistic* choices made by ice&fire, as they marshal the aesthetic mis-en-scène of AfHR performance. In analysing activist theatre, Paget questions the aesthetic potency of the 'rehearsed-reading': 'Art must, after all, always constitute more than simple 'message'' he argues; 'by contrast a rehearsed reading would seem indeed 'flattened' and *ipso facto* inferior.... If art is complex and sophisticated, the rehearsed reading is – well, a bit *art-less*'.¹⁵⁹ Paget argues 'flattened art' documentary forms are the appropriate vehicle for the delivery and reception of activist messages:¹⁶⁰ utilitarian, untroubled by showiness, their essence distilled in 'the presence in space of the actor, their voice in real time, and the words spoken. All heavily foregrounded by the very absence of other layers of theatrical communication',¹⁶¹ the form effectively substitutes 'breadth of content coverage' for 'depth of character psychology'.¹⁶² To illustrate this point, Paget highlights AfHR actor, Jeremy Tiang's perspective that 'the work allowed "less licence" to the actor, who was called upon "not to create but recreate"'.¹⁶³ Paget's coinage 'flattened art' suggests a binary between 'flattened art' and 'rounded art', the latter which he describes in terms of 'three-dimensional naturalistic theatre [...] depth-related, rooted to the micro-aspect of issues'.¹⁶⁴ He concludes that AfHR is 'better understood as an insertion into the wider ecology of activism', rather than operating 'within the context of the theatrical'.¹⁶⁵ For a project that prioritises the exploration of human rights, this summation is in line with AfHR's campaigning aims, and

¹⁵⁸ Derek Paget, 'Continuities Lost and Found: Documentary Theatre, Agency and the Actor,' London Theatre Seminar (London: Lecture, 2010).

¹⁵⁹ Paget, 'Acts of Commitment,' 181.

¹⁶⁰ Paget deploys the term 'flattened art' as a counterpoint to David Hare's tribute to Caryl Churchill in which Hare claimed that in her writing '[Churchill] never flattens her art out of a need to advance what she urgently has to say' (Lucy Powell, 'Why Caryl Churchill is the Top Girl,' *The Times*, last modified September 1, 2008, accessed January 1, 2012, http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/article4634455.ece).

¹⁶¹ Paget, 'Continuities Lost and Found'.

¹⁶² Paget, 'Acts of Commitment,' 181.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁶⁴ Paget, 'Continuities Lost and Found'.

¹⁶⁵ Paget, 'Acts of Commitment', 190.

yet it fails to fully describe the company's *artful* approach to testimony and performance and the paradigm of human rights theatre suggested in this investigation. Whilst I note Paget's careful critique, I contend that the aesthetic interleaving of the AfHR plays is indeed 'complex', the 'flatness' of some moments of presentation being 'rounded' out in the full complement of performance choices in the intra-textual and extra-textual moments that comprise the whole event. I concur with Paget's highlighting of the non-naturalistic acting process required of testimonial performances, but contrapuntally see the 'sophistication' here in alternative modes of character construction demanded by the compound aims of AfHR events. Paget himself repeatedly describes the monologue speeches as 'arias': highly crafted emotional inundations which takes us to the heart of the characters' experiences. Paget's denomination of *The Illegals* as 'art-in-miniature' reinscribes a normative hierarchy of systems of art-making, valuing textual decoration and investiture in the acting of becoming.

¹⁶⁶ Bacon suggests the purposeful adoption of a meta-performance style by the actors when she directs them to 'honour the whole person' without becoming transfixed by the emotional contours of the script.¹⁶⁷ James Young's analysis of documentary theatre notes that 'the principle aims of such a style are to efface the work's constructedness, in order to foster the illusion of actuality, which rhetorically persuades an audience of a work's objectivity'.¹⁶⁸ I would further argue that the ostentatious 'flattening' of 'art' in the interior frame of these plays, does not account for the curated artistry of the 'outer-frame' of pre- and post-show events which surround them.¹⁶⁹ I suggest that in the testimonial-verbatim practice of AfHR, the constructed *mise-en-scène* is not effaced but manifestly performed. Bacon selects the appropriate theatrical effects to assert an aesthetic of credibility and authenticity. The effect

¹⁶⁶ Paget, 'Acts of Commitment', 185.

¹⁶⁷ Inchley, 'Touring Testimonies'.

¹⁶⁸ James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 65.

¹⁶⁹ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 2001), 137.

of these directorial decisions is to telegraph to the audience that they should closely *attend* to the words of the script. ‘Real words’ which urge us to face what ‘really happened’ are the critical point of engagement. AfHR prioritise these signifiers of the ‘credible’ through theatrical contrivance. The theatre of AfHR deliberately foregrounds the performance architecture, the inner workings of the machine, as evidence of its own openness. AfHR’s aesthetic attempt to ‘foster the illusion of actuality’ through assemblages and constructions of ‘flattened art’ therefore do not necessarily denote artlessness.

In an interview with Paget, Bacon states that ‘I would never define [AfHR] as a theatrical activity, it is much more a campaigning activity’.¹⁷⁰ Bacon’s equivocation vis-à-vis the theatre/non-theatre denomination can be seen as an uneasy response to the need to classify and categorise AfHR to expediently suit the changing locations of the work. In our conversation regarding Nancy Groves’ glowing review of *Rendition Monologues* for *What’s On Stage*, where Groves describes the event as ‘hard to review as theatre, still more to give it a star rating’,¹⁷¹ Bacon responds frankly: ‘True – it’s not really theatre in the traditional sense’, but still asserts, ‘of course it’s *theatre*. That’s how it works!’.¹⁷² Bacon acknowledges that she intentionally blurs the labelling of the AfHR project to de-escalate expectations of a ‘full show’ for actors and audiences, but also because she wishes to foreground the activist content of the work, privileging the human rights message. Using trained actors to perform the testimonies in the script, Bacon maximises the æffects of their instincts towards embodied feeling. In asking the actors to ‘stand beside, rather than within’ their characters, she demonstrates a belief the testimony speeches gain a becalmed historicisation that enhances

¹⁷⁰ Paget, ‘Acts of Commitment,’ 181.

¹⁷¹ Nancy Groves, Review of *Rendition Monologues*, *Whats On Stage*, last modified August 22, 2009, accessed August 23, 2009, <http://www.nancygroves.co.uk/page8.htm>.

¹⁷² Bacon, interview (2015).

clear communication of their message.¹⁷³ Bacon generally refuses to be drawn into questions of allegiance to form, or to be arrested by the minutiae of debates about the boundaries of performance: ‘we’re a theatre company, and they’re actors, we do theatre’.¹⁷⁴ The staging of AfHR scripts constitutes theatre: a public sharing of stories containing narrative tension, varied modes of characterisation, entertainment, emotion. The testimonies require a certain light of human responsivity underneath them to make them animate, and to cast shadows, but also require emotional restraint, as Sonja Linden emphasised in our interview, so not to overwhelm the audience with the shock and awe of *sparagmos*, and to retain the structural perpetrations of human rights transgressions in view. Likewise, Bacon is committed to the disposition of live, communal theatre, convinced that it remains the most æffective site for the articulation of stories of witness and triumph designed to evoke a *sentient* response that will enable consciousness to flourish.

In his ‘Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre’ (1968), playwright Peter Weiss asserted, ‘[e]ven at its most activist and militant, when it seeks to free itself from artistic elements and “aesthetic categories”, such theatre remains at root an artistic production’.¹⁷⁵ In his ‘Propositions’, Weiss offers the prospect of a highly aestheticised documentary theatre:

source material can be presented in a range of different ways [...] including (a) in brief rhythmic passages, (b) in caricature, song, pantomime, chorus, mask, music, (c) in discontinuous sequence, using flashback, dream, reflection, or (d) using the transcription of “raw”, “unrestricted” verbatim material which often “burst[s] the structure asunder”.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Bacon, interview (2015).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Peter Weiss, ‘Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre’ (1968), in Attilio Favorini, *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theatre* (New York: Ecco Press, 1995), 141.

¹⁷⁶ Peter Weiss, ‘Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre’ (1968), in Attilio Favorini, *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theatre* (New York: Ecco Press, 1995), 141.

Tim Robbins' production of Blank and Jensen's script *The Exonerated* (2000), based on the testimony of prisoners on death row, featured actors seated in a line and reading from black folders, as per the staging typically used by AfHR. These recurrent black folders are a visual symbol and signifier of authenticity, the framed transportation of temporarily-borrowed words. These actors perform 'not-performing'. The performance of reading is intended to reconnect the speech-act of testimony to the materiality of its transcription, and to authenticate the artefact as guiding a supplicant teller. The AfHR staging has its roots in the conventions set out by Peter Weiss in his notes to the text of *The Investigation* (1965), his restaging of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, and calls to mind the semiology of a formal hearing, a pseudo-courtroom, or the cool atmosphere of the tribunal dramatised by the Tricycle Theatre contemporaneous 'tribunal plays'. Throughout this section, I have suggested that such 'composed' performances deliberately recall this lineage and utilise a specific set of persuasive 'theatrical' choices, demonstrated by the symbolic relationship with the physical presence of the script. This sober staging is designed to create a frugal – but not 'artless' – representation that denotes a form of ethical and aesthetic acquiescence in the face of the human misery described. Thinking of the processes of restaging testimony, I now turn to the methodologies of verbatim theatre in the work of AfHR, considering the relationship of this form to the legal and statist discourses that underpin human rights.

Verbatim as Legal Redress for Human Rights

Describing verbatim theatre as a discontinuous form and a 'broken tradition', Derek Paget argues that the millennial flourishing of documentary plays in the UK saw the resurfacing of

a form of theatre ‘called into being by circumstance.’¹⁷⁷ It is tied to time and tied to need’.¹⁷⁸ Janelle Reinelt argues that documentary theatre is ‘performative of a public sphere’ where the ‘embodied negotiated relationship of discrete subjects to the performance and its materials allows for collective experiences of grief or mourning, experiences of social solidarity or hilarity, as well as [...] “political mimesis”’.¹⁷⁹ Reinelt suggests that watching the experience of political struggle on stage has the capacity to make the audience ‘want to take up that struggle too’; Reinelt’s analysis offers a way to understand the mechanism by which AfHR endeavours to conscientise diverse publics towards political consciousness. From the legacy of Erwin Piscator and his production of *Trotz alledem!* in Berlin in 1925,¹⁸⁰ through the work of more recent ‘theatre of the real’ makers who privilege the sharp sliver of eye-witness veracity, documentary form has a strong theatrical presence throughout the 20th Century.¹⁸¹ Paget additionally advances the millennial resurgence of verbatim theatre coincided with increasingly widespread public mistrust of government spin, dogmatic journalism, and an absence of credible political narratives; for Paget, ‘scepticism seems now to percolate through the body politic’.¹⁸² The sustained encounters with the other in verbatim theatre make traumatic experience *sensible*, ‘and reach those parts of the mind apparently cauterised’

¹⁷⁷ Paget, *No Other Way to Tell It*, 224.

¹⁷⁸ Paget, ‘Continuities Lost and Found,’ 173.

¹⁷⁹ Janelle Reinelt, ‘The Promise of documentary’, in *Get Real*, eds. Forsyth and Megson, 12. Reinelt notes that she feels the term ‘verbatim’ unnecessarily ups the ante on documentary theatre, and therefore collapses the categories together. Other theorists see verbatim as a sub-genre or extension of documentary theatre, whereas I contend that there is a useful distinction between the spoken composure of verbatim theatre, and the written components of documentary theatre as different modes of thinking and knowledge production.

¹⁸⁰ Drawing parallels with the arrival of other recording technologies like the printing press, Tom Cantrell, in his book *Acting in Documentary Theatre*, notes that ‘the development of verbatim theatre, rather like Piscator’s use of new film projection technologies, is closely linked to simple technological development – the invention of the portable cassette recorder’. He notes the arrival of this artefact allowed for the mobility and reproducibility of a polyphony of voices. (Cantrell, *Documentary Theatre*, 170).

¹⁸¹ Here I am thinking of makers such as Joan Littlewood, Emily Mann, Anna Devere Smith, Tanika Gupta, Yael Farber and Alecky Blythe. Which is not to consign these pioneering female theatre-makers, and artists of colour to marginalia, in favour of discussing some of the ‘big beasts’ of UK Theatre, rather to suggest that, in discussing the political and truth claims made for verbatim theatre, I am in debate with some of their pronouncements.

¹⁸² Paget, ‘Acts of Commitment,’ 176.

by the fractured information that arrives incomplete and partial through media distortion, governmental redaction, and community fragmentation.¹⁸³

The use of verbatim methodology to provide alternative narratives and interject in the national political conversation was adopted by theatre-makers such as Robin Soans,¹⁸⁴ Max Stafford Clark, David Hare,¹⁸⁵ and Richard Norton-Taylor, whose ‘tribunal’ plays at the Tricycle Theatre in collaboration with director Nicholas Kent, sought to expose the disingenuities, obfuscations and calumnies within the processes of the state.¹⁸⁶ Norton-Taylor advocates verbatim as a form suited to satiate the public’s ‘hunger to engage with political material in a serious, unsensationalised manner’.¹⁸⁷ For him the theatre should be a place for ‘witnessing the search for truth and the exposure of injustice as a group of spectators places a corporate responsibility on the audience to acknowledge that injustice – and potentially, to act to prevent similar future injustices’.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, in her schema of contemporary verbatim theatre, Carol Martin asserts that one function is to ‘re-open trials in order to critique justice, to add to the historical record, to reconstruct an event, to connect auto/biography with history’, explicitly aligning this form of theatre with the restorative work of human rights commissions and truth and reconciliation committees.¹⁸⁹ Mary

¹⁸³ Richard Norton-Taylor, ‘Richard Norton-Taylor,’ in *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, eds. Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon, 2008), 123. It is worth reflecting that during the late 1990s-early 2000s we had not (yet) reached the nadir of ‘fake news’; the subsequent decline of verbatim theatre suggests it could not compete with the weaponised combination of digital technology and populist rhetoric which, in the contemporary Trumpian era of ‘post-truth politics’ and deep-fakery has fully normalised public mistrust and conspiracist paranoia.

¹⁸⁴ Soans’ plays include: *A State Affair* (2000), *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* (2004), *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), *Across the Divide*, *Life After Scandal* (2007).

¹⁸⁵ Amongst Hare’s prodigious output, his ‘verbatim’ plays include: *Via Dolorosa* (1998), *The Permanent Way* (2004), *Stuff Happens* (2004), *The Power of Yes* (2009).

¹⁸⁶ Norton-Taylor’s tribunal plays mostly draw on the published accounts of public enquiries: *Half the Picture* (1994), *Nuremberg* (1996), *The Colour of Justice* (1999), *Justifying the War* (2003), *Bloody Sunday* (2005). *Called to Account* (2007) used verbatim interview source material to create a pre-emptive fictional enquiry into the UK’s involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

¹⁸⁷ Norton-Taylor, ‘Richard Norton-Taylor’, in *Verbatim Verbatim*, eds. Hammond and Steward, 124.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Martin, ‘Bodies of Evidence,’ 12-13.

Luckhurst highlights a shift during the early 2000s towards verbatim theatre which focusses on the principles of legal redress and stages quasi-retrials for notable miscarriages of justice or human rights abuse:

[...] tribunal plays demonstrate a shift from the local to the national, and are concerned with miscarriages of justice, the implementation of law, public institutions, and issues related to human rights... audiences engage in an act of witnessing, which is politicised.¹⁹⁰

Luckhurst's identification of this phenomenon applies to the work of ice&fire and AfHR, where even if the judicial outcome does not alter, attendance represents an act of social protest and solidarity. I argue that in the interplay between re-presented source material and engaged audience response, verbatim theatre promises a restoration, a return to public enfranchisement in political decision-making. I contend ice&fire's interest in exploring human rights issues through verbatim performance is an appeal to a virtual transnational community, which offers an alternative to the regional in the form of theatrical activism. This can be interpreted as a mission to re-enfranchise the *demos* within authoritarian states, or even within democracies – like our own – compromised by the decisions taken by incumbent national political parties. This is aligned with a positive interpretation of globalisation which points to the transnational mechanisms of the UN, the ICC, the ECJ and other organisations that provide global instruments for the actions of the state to be called to account.¹⁹¹ On a modest scale, AfHR's verbatim theatre project is enmeshed within this infrastructure, and similarly committed to traversing social rupture, and disseminating the 'truth' of global

¹⁹⁰ Luckhurst, 'Verbatim Theatre,' 211-212.

¹⁹¹ The legal outcomes of such mechanisms are often symbolic or declaratory, and it would be wrong to pretend that there is sufficient international legal cooperation on redress, or consensus on jurisdiction, but despite the neo-conservative charge of stealth federalism, the human rights conventions and treaties at least enable transgressions to be cited and recorded.

tragedies through a concentrated encounter with a re-embodied ‘voice’, conscientising audiences through a shared act of witness.

In his article on AfHR, Derek Paget laments, ‘much debate about the form has, reductively in my view, concerned “accuracy”’.¹⁹² Accuracy is not always, or necessarily, synonymous with empirical evidence and can be philosophically problematic. However, in the context of human rights theatre which invites people to ‘act upon their commitment’, ‘truth’ as an animating principle carries weight.¹⁹³ Verbatim drama benefits from the presumed authenticity of an unmediated form, where the partialities and predilections of a creative author are replaced by a concert of real voices expressing their lived truths.¹⁹⁴ Soans describes the effect of cynicism falling away from an audience at the invocation of the ‘real’: ‘Artificiality is a charge that cannot be raised against the verbatim playwright unless he or she is a complete charlatan’.¹⁹⁵ Yet in common with the eminent coterie of like-minded practitioners listed above (including AfHR), Soans himself dramaturgically sculpts, mediating his product as he dices and splices, and picks out the ripest moments. Indeed, Martin notes that while documentary theatre is typically created from archived materials which foreground the nonfictional, it makes use of the literary and theatrical devices of fiction.¹⁹⁶ Stephen Bottoms notes in reference to Soans’ *Talking to Terrorists* that the script traverses temporal and geographical domains to adjoin conversations or contrive a space for exchange between people who have never met in real-life,¹⁹⁷ weaving accounts together to

¹⁹² Paget, ‘Acts of Commitment,’ 188.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Stephen J. Bottoms, ‘Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?’, *The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 58.

¹⁹⁵ Robin Soans, ‘Robin Soans’, in *Verbatim Verbatim*, eds. Hammod and Steward, 24.

¹⁹⁶ Martin, ‘Bodies of Evidence,’ 9.

¹⁹⁷ Bottoms, ‘Putting the Document into Documentary,’ 52.

create quasi-dialogue.¹⁹⁸ Anodyne, folksy metaphors of ‘weaving’, ‘stitching’ and ‘crafting’ are used readily by creators of verbatim in place of more manipulative, synonymic terms such as ‘manufacturing’ or ‘engineering’. This masks the fact that in the industrious (and often commercial) pursuit of a strong story, scenes are often imagined, speech re-scripted – ‘we recontextualise them slightly’¹⁹⁹ – or comments misrepresented through second-hand collection of material.²⁰⁰ For Bottoms, the editing, redacting, re-authoring process undermines the legitimacy of these practitioners’ investigative methods, exposing the writers as selecting and amending material to tell a predetermined narrative, with ‘real words’ co-opted to reach a preordained end-point. Luckhurst notes the recurrent ethical questions that have dogged the verbatim form as these writers seek to hold in balance their responsibility towards another person’s story against the delivery of narrative momentum.²⁰¹ Perhaps these are minor authorial infractions set against distortions of memory and political sophistry; as Soans wryly admits in his response to questions about his hybrid working methods: ‘I would say it depends on what is meant by being truthful: literal truth or truth in spirit?’²⁰² For many verbatim playwrights, small matters of authorial choice and expurgation are a pettifogging distraction from the overall political effect.²⁰³ However, even Bacon as creator of many AfHR verbatim scripts, acknowledges that although she herself adds lines, ventriloquises and compresses characters together, the slippery concept of ‘truth’ and its

¹⁹⁸ Soans himself does not record interviews, but makes pen-and-paper notes, and whilst this methodology might be appropriate to collect telling snippets, it also makes the recording of a ‘verbatim’ testimony almost impossible.

¹⁹⁹ Stafford-Clark, ‘David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark,’ *Verbatim Verbatim*, eds. Hammod and Steward, 69.

²⁰⁰ Cantrell, *Documentary Theatre*, 171. See David Hare’s account of his dispute over the contextualisation of content in *The Permanent Way* with Chris Garnett, Chief Executive of GNER, which highlights the problems associated with delegation in this process: ‘What happened was that I had not even attended the interview with Chris Garnett. It had been done by actors and they gave me the dialogue’ (Stafford-Clark, ‘David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark,’ 61).

²⁰¹ Luckhurst, ‘Verbatim Theatre,’ 202.

²⁰² Soans, ‘Robin Soans,’ 41.

²⁰³ As a working journalist, Richard Norton-Taylor unsurprisingly speaks very eloquently on the comparison between journalism and theatre as media to convey a more illuminating and ‘intellectually honest’ portrayal (interpretation) of events: ‘there is a specific power in watching something played out in front of you. A group of actors on a stage can draw back the curtains of Whitehall, or those of any other powerful authority, and give a sense of context much more effectively than can the written word alone’ (Norton-Taylor, ‘Norton-Taylor,’ 126).

manipulation has a complex impact on her response to other contemporary theatre productions. Discussing the confabulations in Judith Thompson's *Palace of the End*,²⁰⁴ she observes that 'Thompson's embellishment of the truth, for what I assume is dramatic effect, sat uneasily with me and made me wonder what other details were invented'.²⁰⁵ Bacon intimates that she felt cheated when her perception of the 'truth' was manipulated by Thompson's inclusion of fictional elements, undermining her overall experience of the play. Here, I return to my stated framework for a human rights theatre, and the animating power of 'real events' to conscientize audiences to action; where truth claims are problematised, or the truth-contract broken, the process of consciousness is diminished.

AfHR: claiming truth for 'real people'

The AfHR model asserts that the traumas and upheavals of recent, living history can be reclaimed from the custodians of official narrative (politicians, ministries of state, the popular press), re-scripted and re-played with a new emphasis on the flesh-and-blood costs to human lives. For Bacon, the authenticating detail of lived experience provides the warp and weft of AfHR scripts:

I have seen so many plays about asylum seekers or immigration that are so badly researched that I come away feeling so angry. I want to say, 'get the details right', because it is so disrespectful if you are representing their lives in a way that is completely wrong. I think that the best way to be authentic, credible, is to stay connected to the person giving their story.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Canadian playwright, Judith Thompson won the Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award for *Palace of the End* at the Edinburgh Festival in 2009.

²⁰⁵ Christine Bacon, 'Why Collaborate?,' ice&fire Archive, last modified September 7, 2009, accessed February 2, 2010, <http://iceandfire.co.uk/archives/1275/>.

²⁰⁶ Bacon, interview (2012).

As I propose in my model of human rights theatre, dramas that make a connection with the human rights agenda necessarily have a profound connection with the real, whether through direct representation of real-life figures or incidents, or through more allegorical practices which make parabolic the sites of human wrongs. I consider AfHR's testimonial-verbatim plays as human rights theatre through their explicit claims to truth-disclosure, informing us that we are witnessing 'first-hand accounts', 'people's real words', and 'true stories'.²⁰⁷ Like many of their peers, AfHR make direct appeal to the 'truth' – both empirical and subjective – to conscientise audiences towards action. According to this conceptualisation, audiences are expected to be catalysed by testified 'reality', moving from a communal processing of disbelief and outrage in response to the performance, becoming *sentient* to the issues, and ultimately returning to their own lives fuelled by a belief that remedies (local and national) are possible. Audiences are brought to socio-political consciousness through the apprehension that what they witness on stage is 'really' happening to 'real' people, who have 'real' emotions. Wounded and woundable. For Bacon, the priority is that 'the stories change something, that people might go away and do something about it', and her hope is substantiated by the feedback of numerous respondents, who reflect that they were motivated to act by the 'truth' of the work.²⁰⁸ One viewer of *Asylum Dialogues* affirmed the play was 'enlightening, amazing, heart-wrenching, exactly the kind of truth that should be presented on the British stage today',²⁰⁹ while another recorded, '[t]his was not what I expected. I was expecting some kind of inauthentic moralising verbatim theatre [...] Although we know it

²⁰⁷ These terms are scattered across different ice&fire publications and descriptions of their work, but also drawn from the verbal framing of their work at the performance events themselves. As per the earlier examination of the 'theatre/non-theatreness' of AfHR, I note that the use of this vocabulary deliberately retains some slippage in order to successfully communicate with different audience groups.

²⁰⁸ Bacon, interview (2015).

²⁰⁹ ice&fire, 'Asylum Dialogues: Productions,' 2015.

must go on, it's still shocking to hear the first-hand accounts of people devoured by the heartless machine of bureaucracy'.²¹⁰ Another post-show comment noted that:

In ice&fire's performance, the chilling truth of the hidden and cruel inequality affecting asylum seekers in British society is laid bare, in front of you; in a safe comfortable space, I heard the truth of people's lived experience, the mental trauma, the physical trauma, the heart tearing decisions & and the scars this leaves behind.²¹¹

AfHR needs to operate with credibility and legitimacy in order to be recognised in the intensely politicised and ideologically contested arena of human rights jurisdiction and activism. The use of 'true stories' on which so much human rights activism is predicated has many detractors, among them psychologists who dispute the notion that memory function might provide unmediated access to autobiographical truth, particularly when recalled through trauma.²¹² In some ways, the pervasive hold of postmodernism and deconstructionism in cultural theory with its emphasis on subjectivity and indeterminacy has served to relegate discussion of the 'truth' from the arena of ideology to the realm of phenomenology and semiology. Assessments of truth have been rendered slippery and treacherous by the ascendancy of concepts of (inter-)subjectivity, instability, and the importance of relative perspective. Derrida's postulation of truth is contingent and constructed, foregrounding the epistemological obstacles inherent in the reception and comprehension of objects, signs, and language which can never be surmounted, where

²¹⁰ ice&fire, 'Asylum Dialogues: Productions,' 2015.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Shoshana Felman, in her writings on the act of testimony, provides a valuable précis of the fluctuating set of alliances at play in the (re)construction of memory: 'As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference' (Felman and Laub, *Crises of Witnessing*, 5). Furthermore, in considering the 'truthfulness' of memories produced as a result of generative retrieval, Elizabeth Loftus argues: 'Story truth and happening truth... As we put meat and muscle on the bare bones of the happening truth, we can get caught up, captured if you will, with the notion of our own stories. We become confused about where the happening truth leaves off and the story truth begins' (Loftus quoted in Lauren Slater, *Opening Sinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century* [London: Bloomsbury, 2004], 191).

language itself ‘depends on infinite referrals to other statements, which themselves only refer to other statements still’.²¹³ All of this arguably serves to problematise any shared comprehension of the world, destabilising the idea of communal ‘truth’. Whereas in a prompt to analyse the politics of truth-claims, Michel Foucault describes the construction of meaning through a deceptive ‘*regime of truth*’ where society seeks to suppress difference, maintain stratification, and crystallise its normative narrative of civic and economic advantage in the service of hegemony, where radicalism is exposed as exterior and positioned as ‘untrue’.²¹⁴ Foucault cautions that we must also be watchful of hierarchies of authentication. The truth-sources of verbatim theatre overlap where they meet one another in their transposition to performance, the plate tectonics of verbatim force up a fictional heart at the meeting place. I thus continue to argue that the liminal space of theatre is the lacuna, the no-placed *u-topos*, where the actuality of (re-)embodiment and presence and the holding and replaying of exogenous testimony, combine as fictive-truths to provide *sentient* access to the subjective reality of world events.

Mediations of truth

The injunction for audiences not to turn away is maintained by AfHR’s insistent references to ‘truth’, reminders these are real stories, and as analysed below, by the framing, dramaturgy, and aesthetics of AfHR plays, all of which are intended to ‘authenticate’ these first-hand accounts. ice&fire qualify claims made for the AfHR programme’s promise of ‘word-for-word’ truth. They acknowledge combining written records, NGO reports and journalistic commentary alongside the purely testimonial material gathered from personal interviews. Where access to the intended subject is impractical, the company utilise ‘first-hand

²¹³ Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 100.

²¹⁴ Michel Foucault, ‘Truth and Power’, *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972 - 1977*, ed. Colin George (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1980), 131.

testimony’ published by campaigning agencies, or newspapers. *Rendition Monologues*, for examples, although scripted by Bacon, was not compiled from interviews conducted directly by the company:²¹⁵ ‘All testimony included in the script is actual and all other information is documentary in nature and available on the public record’.²¹⁶ The below extracts reveal the extent of Bacon’s shaping of political prisoner Binyam Mohamed’s testimony in comparison with the original transcript originally. Here I compare the below text from Reprieve:

It was pitch black, no lights on in the rooms for most of the time. They hung me up for two days. My legs had swollen. My wrists and hands had gone numb. There was loud music, Slim Shady and Dr. Dre for 20 days. Then they changed the sounds to horrible ghost laughter and Halloween sounds. At one point, I was chained to the rails for a fortnight. The CIA worked on people, including me, day and night. Plenty lost their minds. I could hear people knocking their heads against the walls and the doors, screaming their heads off.²¹⁷

with this from the *Rendition Monologues* playscript:

Binyam: I ended up in Kabul in a place called ‘The Prison of Darkness’. It was pitch black, no lights on in the rooms for most of the time. They hung me up for two days. After a while I didn’t feel I existed at all. Plenty of prisoners lost their minds. I could hear people knocking their heads against the walls and the doors, screaming their heads off.²¹⁸

Bacon’s edit of Binyam’s testimony is guided by principles of sensation: human impacts and feelings are privileged. However, although Bacon does add clarifying notes that do not appear in the original testimony (‘I ended up in Kabul’), incongruously, she removes the

²¹⁵ As ex-detainees of ‘black-site’ detention centres, Abdullah Almalki, Khalid El-Masri, Marwan Jabour, Binyam Mohamed have all placed (parts of) their testimony on the public record. Their stories can be found in the Human Rights Watch Archives or reported in *The New York Times* or *Washington Post*. In many ways, this play presents an interesting limit-case to AfHR’s work where intensely politicised material is presented without real challenge to the testimony provided. This makes the ideological colouring of Bacon’s play very strong, and while the play does a great deal to expose the barbaric redundancy of torture, it does little to present alternatives to Jabour’s and Mohamed’s contested accounts.

²¹⁶ Christine Bacon, ‘Introduction. *Rendition Monologues*’. St. John’s Church, Edinburgh. (August 18, 2009)

²¹⁷ Reprieve, ‘Guantanamo Bay: Binyam Mohammed’ (2009), accessed May 22, 2010, <http://www.reprieve.org.uk/binyammohamed>.

²¹⁸ Bacon, *Rendition Monologues*.

specific human rights context given by Binyam which makes clear the American role in extraordinary rendition. In AfHR scripts verbatim speech is sometimes melded with documentary sources. Actors tasked with embodying the testimony of interviews also seamlessly give voice to findings of reports, political proceedings, and news items. I have argued that one of the mechanisms by which verbatim theatre creates effect is through the reconnection with filigree human detail. The personal idioms, prosody and rhythms of speech which reveal emotion and *sentience* at the human heart of verbatim performance are compromised by the recourse to organisational prose, with its brand-speak and group-think. Such reports are usually the product of detailed, corroborated research, but delivered through the lens of organisational ideology. In the communal writing process and formal frameworks of report-writing it is often difficult to trace the personal voice within advocacy literature. Although it might provide context, the effect of AfHR ‘characters’ suddenly diverting to articulate officially sanctioned findings inside the structure of their ‘personal testimony’ requires an awkward switch to a form of authorial omniscience which can have the effect of skewing the audience’s perception of the lived experience.²¹⁹ In this configuration, affective imagination must be combined with the rhetoric of persuasion and explanation.

Palestine Monologues billed as ‘first-hand testimonies from the Occupied Territories’ prodigiously uses ‘exterior’ source material.²²⁰ Sometimes this is clearly marked, at others the shift is communicated less emphatically by a change of rhetorical register or tone:

²¹⁹ In the majority of AfHR plays—*Asylum Monologues/Dialogues*, *Rendition Monologues*, *Listen to Me*, *Broke*, *Getting On*, for example—each actor will be assigned a fixed character identity; on the other hand, in *Palestine Monologues*, the actors embody a range of different characters and give voice to a range of documentary reports. This is likely the result of the wide pool of research material amassed by Linden during the creation of the fictional play *Welcome to Ramallah* (for which *Palestine Monologues* was the anticipated companion piece), and a comparatively small number of direct interviews. It would appear that most of the soldiers’ accounts, for example, are drawn from an archive of testimony called ‘Breaking the Silence’:

http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies_group_e.asp.

²²⁰ *ice&fire*, *Palestine Monologues*.

Actor 1: It is our right to live in a better place than a refugee camp. To live like those who live in the heart of Tel Aviv. To see the sea. These are simple dreams.

Actor 2: Since 2000, 68 women have been forced to give birth at checkpoints. The Israeli authorities contend that:

Actor 1: This regime of closures and restrictions is necessary to prevent Palestinians from entering Israel to carry out suicide bombings and other attacks.

Actor 2: However, according to an Amnesty International report published last year, virtually all the six hundred or so closures - checkpoints, gates, blocked roads and most of the barrier walls are located inside the West Bank, not between Israel and the West Bank. "They curtail or prevent movement between Palestinian towns and villages, splitting and isolating Palestinian communities, separating Palestinians from their agricultural land, hampering access to work, schools, health facilities and relatives, and destroying the Palestinian economy."²²¹

Amnesty International's report, 'Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories', is used as a component of the play-text which consists of the elective placing of documentary reports, alongside first-hand testimony derived from Linden's interviews, as well as un-referenced 'factual' statements (as seems to be the case in the first line of Actor 2). Linden's list of research sources is extensive and published on the ice&fire website.²²² However, some of the sources and 'facts' asserted are derived from editorials and think-pieces; not all of the 'facts' presented in the piece have necessarily been independently corroborated, and some might even be disputed by rival 'watch' organisations.

All documentary theatre reveals its intrinsic politicisation in the process of selection and editing, but the hybridity of this amalgamated iteration of the form – not unique to the AfHR project – creates ethical and theatrical complexity. Therefore, the actors could be seen as switching portraying 'non-matrixed characters', to adopt Michael Kirby's phraseology.²²³

²²¹ ice&fire, *Palestine Monologues*.

²²² Ironically, this confusion is further compounded by the list of sources appended to the online script of *Palestine Monologues*, an extensive list in which interview events sit uneasily alongside reports from a range of sources without any attempt to differentiate one from another or to identify where they appear in the play-text itself. <http://iceandfire.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/list-of-sources-pal-mons.pdf>

²²³ See Michel Kirby, 'On Acting and Not-Acting,' in *The Drama Review*, 16, no. 1 (March 1972), 3-15.

Fluid transitions between sources – and performing styles – are demonstrated in the following extract wherein the final line marked for ‘Actor 1’ discernibly moves back into personal testimony where this elision in the script between sources exhibits a political deployment of the original testimony accounts:

Actor 2: 1,500 soldiers are permanently deployed to Hebron to protect the 400 hundred or so Jewish settlers, and this has led to severe restrictions on the Palestinian population including not being allowed to walk or drive on some of the roads in the heart of their city.

Actor 1: Not long after I was posted to Hebron, I was on guard at our post, when suddenly, from one of the small streets, a settler girl shows up and shouts at me very urgently.²²⁴

However, in an alternative reading, the above extracts provide examples of an interruption to the factual flow of official reporting, where the personal, testimonial interjection is a reminder of ‘peoples’ lived reality’ behind the headlines and statistics, the ‘truth of what’s going on’ which audiences need to ‘confront’.²²⁵

Throughout the portfolio of AfHR plays ‘reported speech’ frequently appears, including interjections from figures of officialdom like border guards, policemen, and soldiers, often taken from interviews at points where the storyteller might sketch the contours of a conversation or ‘ventriloquise’ the other person in a scene. With acting and staging choices that recall Brecht’s Epic Theatre – minimal staging, direct address, multi-rolling dialogue²²⁶ – AfHR scripts also occasionally require performers to step out of ‘character’ to perform supernumerary roles. But this is not *wholly* Brecht’s process of distancing. The conscientising process of the AfHR scripts encourages audiences to see the characters as ‘real’ people. Interchanges are imagined by Bacon as the scriptwriter to heighten moments of

²²⁴ ice&fire, *Palestinian Monologues*.

²²⁵ Bacon, interview (2015).

²²⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett. (London: Methuen, 1993) 36.

revelation or confrontation, provide dramatic tension, and intensify the emotional stakes of a given encounter. ‘Whenever there’s a moment of interaction – grab it like it’s a scene!’

Bacon reminds actors in rehearsal.²²⁷ Verbatim playwright Alecky Blythe encapsulates this motivation to retain fidelity to the testimonies she receives, whilst also recognising the dramatic contours of a compelling story: ‘I do feel a great responsibility to represent the [subjects] in a way that they are happy with. At the same time, I have a responsibility to the audience to present them with a good evening’s theatre’.²²⁸ The following exchange from AfHR’s *Listen to Me* includes hypothetical speech from interrogators when a young man is accused of rape:

[Two actors approach him]

Actor 8: You’re under arrest. We are taking you away.

Chea: What did I do wrong?

Actor 1: We’ll tell you all of this at the police station.

[They put Chea on a seat]

Actor 1: A young girl in your village has been raped. Did you hear about that?

Chea: No, I didn’t.

Actor 8: Was it you who raped her?

Chea: No!²²⁹

This exchange helps *flesh out* the scene for the audience in a moment of immediate fear and consequence that would otherwise be historicised through reportage. However, Chea’s lines above do not appear in his original testimony; his story has been re-imagined and dramatised by the writers, to provoke *sentience*, a felt-understanding, to the inner frame of the scene, an attempt to engender æffect within the audience. The choice of vocabulary in these interjections is simple, but the exchange builds a false impression of the possibility of fully knowing the events of the past. The invention of this scene also prompts questions of the

²²⁷ Paget, ‘Acts of Commitment,’ 185.

²²⁸ Alecky Blythe, ‘Alecky Blythe,’ in *Verbatim Verbatim*, eds. Hammond and Steward, 94.

²²⁹ Christine Bacon and Sara Masters, *Listen to Me*.

company's attitude of entitlement towards the lived experience of the other. In re-presenting their subject through an almost-imperceptible act of imaginative mimesis within the dramatic frame, the playwright slides into fictive biography or historical fiction. What might be construed as a similar monopolising act of 'speaking for' occurs in *Asylum Dialogues*. This play features a character contrived by Linden and Bacon, called 'Linda', the Scottish neighbour of 'Mary', a Ugandan refugee. In the world of the play, Linda compromised her own personal safety to provide Mary sanctuary in her house, and obstructed the police during an attempted deportation:

Mary: We just kept quiet. I was lying on her bed now with the kids and we kept them under the covers. (To kids) Shhh! Then we heard a banging on Linda's door.

Actor 2: Can you please come to the door. Come to the door please.

Mary: We all stayed under the covers, in the dark.

Actor 2: We're Immigration officers.

Linda: I don't need any immigration. I don't deal with you people.

Actor 2: Can you open the door please, let us in.

Linda: I will not open the door.²³⁰

Asylum Dialogues was conceived to celebrate those allies who, according to Bacon, 'stood up for asylum seekers as a neighbour, as a friend, brilliant stories because they counter that whole thing that the British are anti-immigration and really affirmed how these encounters can [...] be life changing if you let them happen'.²³¹ However, in what may have been a practical necessity, but is also nevertheless a significant subversion of the play's billing, one half of the 'Dialogue' between Mary and Linda was not actually provided by the original source but was perforce entirely scripted: 'Sonja and I went up to interview ["Linda"] but then she didn't turn up... ever since she got that police charge for obstructing justice, she just walked away'.²³² Taken together, each of these small edits and flourishes accumulate to

²³⁰ Linden and Bacon, *Asylum Dialogues*.

²³¹ Bacon, interview by Ancey Lax (August 27, 2009).

²³² Ibid.

contend with the AfHR scripts' claims of verisimilitude: the intertextual inclusion of official reports; interleaving of external comment; fabrication of dialogue; and the dramatisation of reported incidents. These are all moments where we are unable to determine the source with total accuracy, and as a result confidence in the overall 'authenticity' of the work is inevitably eroded. Where the platform of human rights activism is the invocation of 'truth' through the reality of lived-experience, then truth-claims around of source material becomes a political issue.

Actors for Human Rights: Dialogues across testimony

As highlighted above, monologues in the AfHR texts are typically cut together to form interlocking dialogues and 'conversations' between different witnesses. This can create a sense of the recurring patterns of crisis that occur when human rights are violated, also forging bonds between 'characters' and can develop thematic links between stories. Additionally, this dramaturgy generates an atmosphere of community and consensus on stage, where the switch between monologic and dialogic address animates a performance of solidarity. AfHR performances typically open with short bursts of dialogue, quick-fire collections of establishing phrases and identifying statements, delivered as interchange between characters who likely never met in real life. Bacon's script of *The Illegals* is a good example of this textual style, which in performance creates a mischievous inversion of the group-therapy confessional:

Actor 7:	I am a clandestine migrant.
Actor 3:	I'm irregular.
Actor 1:	Undocumented.
Actor 2:	Paperless.
Actor 4:	Unauthorised.
Actor 5:	Informal.

Actor 7: I'm irregularly informal.
 Actor 3: An endogenous undocumented migrant.
 Actor 6: Endogenous eh? I'm exogenous.
 Actor 4: Semi-compliant.
 Actor 2: I'm non-compliant.
 Actor 1: An immigration offender.²³³

Similarly, thematic parallels and echoes are placed concurrently in the scripts, so that amongst the characters on stage, remarks and observations come to resemble a responsive dialogue, and thus a dynamic is created of characters talking together, sharing stories in concert. Testimonies from the children who participated in *Listen to Me* are grouped around specific topics to suggest conversation, although in reality, the linguistic, temporal and geographical distance between them covers thousands of miles.²³⁴

Mariya: For supper they gave us red beetroot. It wasn't salted, and it was cooked without onion. Also boiled fish because they didn't let us eat fried fish. Ugh! And that's all.

[Aishe comes in with another bench]

Aishe: We have one meal every day. If my father has made some money we go to market to buy vegetables and maybe some eggs. When we don't have enough money we don't eat. It's true that a lot of people here eat from the rubbish bins in town. I've done it too. I'm not ashamed.

Kavitha: Often we don't even have rice to eat at home. Even when I feel hungry, I can't find anything to eat.²³⁵

Bacon contends that this (re-)shaping and curation of community across the AfHR repertoire provides an opportunity for a shared 'safe space' for marginal people and disempowered voices.²³⁶ The mise-en-scène offers mutuality and companionship, in counterpoint to the isolation and peripheral status articulated in the monologic self-narratives. However, this de-

²³³ Christine Bacon, *The Illegals*.

²³⁴ Due to child protection regulations, this script was derived from questionnaire responses fielded by project partners Save The Children UK, rather than from interviews. Mariya is Ukranian, Aishe is Roma and Kavitha is Indian.

²³⁵ Bacon and Masters, *Listen to Me*.

²³⁶ Bacon, interview (2015).

contextualising of the original testimony ‘muddies the waters’, as Bottoms cautions,²³⁷ encouraging the audience to read sentimentalised kinship over and above the more intractable structural conditions of human rights injustice. These are, of course, fictional encounters, aspirational and rendered solely for the duration of the performance event, but perhaps the transcendental promise embedded in a human rights theatre, are the utopic moments, here realised where the characters are able to find some communality and shared-consciousness. The polyphony of voices lending potency to a *collective* plea for the recognition and protection of their human rights. In this final section of my investigation of AfHR I want to address the tensions between ‘speaking over’ in testimonial-verbatim theatre, and points towards alternative ethical readings for surrogate bodies.

AfHR: Ethical Mediations of the ‘Actor-Avatar’

The challenges for socially-oriented practitioners in realising ethical partnerships with participants are set out by critic Helen Nicholson, ‘these can be difficult sets of negotiations as there are sometimes different interests at stake, which makes the need for an ethics of praxis all the more acute’.²³⁸ Furthermore, with human rights explicitly at the centre of their mission, ice&fire have a concomitant responsibility to ensure that their methodological processes meet the ethical aspirations of the human rights framework. This would certainly include ensuring that subjects are not exploited, misrepresented, appropriated, nor have their individual agency diminished. Dominick Le Capra argues, ‘[i]t is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has the right to the victim’s

²³⁷ Bottoms, ‘Putting the Document into Documentary,’ 60.

²³⁸ Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2005), 157.

voice or subject position'.²³⁹ Susan Sontag extends this scepticism to pose related questions: 'The pity and disgust that such narratives or images inspire should not distract us from asking what stories, what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are not being shown'.²⁴⁰ On this reading, ice&fire risk reinscribing hegemonic narratives of control by appropriating the voices of traumatised others for their own purposes. Their work could be understood as heightening subjugation (despite their rubric of empowerment), if we concur with those who argue the testifiers who contribute their stories to AfHR scripts might have lost their agency, their voice, and certainly their direct access to the audience as a result of the mediation of playwright and actors.

In the work of ice&fire there remains a persistent tension between the bestowal and removal of agency, and the substitution and surrogacy of voice. In one interview, I ask Bacon whether it might be a more ethical address for the 'real people' in question to be facilitated and supported to tell their personal stories directly, personifying and embodying their own story. Her response reflected a privileging of the goals of advocacy, and the need for the performance to communicate a clear and resonant message, which might not be able to crystallise from the story-giver themselves. For Bacon, this is a process which requires professional elaboration: 'it's not as if this is just somebody's 'blah' outpouring, this has been crafted into a script to hold people's attention'.²⁴¹ Addressing accusations of 'prostituting' other people's stories, Bacon is exasperated: 'what would people prefer, that I took a circus

²³⁹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma (Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society)*, (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 78.

²⁴⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 42.

²⁴¹ Bacon, interview (2009). One of the contributors to *Asylum Monologues*, Olive, performed her own testimony in the 2003 performance piece called *A Woman's Place*, designed to articulate the experience of recent female refugees. However, this act of re-staging was not without its psychological cost, as Helen Nicholson recounts: 'Olive explained that she found her own story so distressing that she could only perform it by imagining that she was talking about someone else. She also told me that in the devising process she had edited her story significantly, selecting the events that she felt capable of retelling in live performance and missing out aspects that were too personally painful' (Nicholson, *Applied Drama*, 96).

of performing refugees around with me? *That* would be unethical. *That* would be exploitative'.²⁴² Bacon attests to the psychological impact that being on stage can have on the testifier: the 'real' Marjorie from *Asylum Monologues* noticed the way audiences steal glances at her when she attends readings of the play, saying 'she feels as if they look across her face and her hands to see if they can locate the proof, if they can see the scars'.²⁴³ Bacon asserts that Marjorie is a uniquely courageous individual, but even for her the act of speaking out in public is distressing; for others less robust, it is inconceivable. As Inchley recalls from her conversation with Bacon, the operating principle is that 'actors are the best communicators of this work, they have performance skills which allow them to "speak up" when they "speak for"'.²⁴⁴ Bacon emphasised to Inchley the authorial requirement to transform the criss-cross confusion of ordinary conversation, in which themes are looped, dropped, and resumed later, sentences half-finished, into a story arc that will communicate the sequence of cause and effect in a direct and immediate format. In an acknowledgment of the fragmentary and non-linear nature of memory, Bacon noted that 'some of [the material for the verbatim scripts] was said at nine in the morning and another sentence at six at night, but we put them together. It is specifically crafted to take the audience on a journey'.²⁴⁵

Many of these ethical and methodological complexities are crystallised in the very interview process which sets in motion every AfHR production. ice&fire utilise the interview process as a method of testimony collection to produce authentic word-of-mouth truth. Yet

²⁴² Bacon interview (2012). There is a note of complexity here to add to Bacon's response – it was around the time of this interview that the company started making occasional work featuring testifiers themselves as actors, performing their own stories. This began with Bacon's collaboration with Kristine Landon-Smith for the play *Souvenirs* (2013), a short that preceded Tamasha's *The Arrival*. Although the company had always made 'participatory' pieces with stakeholder groups, this paved the way for ice&fire's residency with Room to Heal, where 'A group of six met fortnightly to explore the therapeutic potential of creative expression and to carefully build the basis of a public-facing performance presented by the group. In June 2016, *A Trace of Me* was performed at the British Library to a capacity audience' (ice&fire, *A Trace of Me*).

²⁴³ Bacon, interview (2012).

²⁴⁴ Inchley, 'Touring Testimonies'.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

there are multiple subjectivities in play in relation to the construction of selfhood and any supposedly forensic act of witness will inevitably be problematised by positionality; as many critics point out, this is especially true of the interview process. Caruth emphasises that any encounter with a traumatised subject ‘resists simple comprehension’.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, individuals’ memories of events are not necessarily stable entities. Testimony is the performance of memory, yet accuracy in memory is seldom the prime objective;²⁴⁷ instead, the aim of memory is commonly to define an identity, reinforce mental consonance, or create shared communal bonds. Self-histories emerge within testimony which are patchwork, constructed in reference to the goals of the self, tendentious of context, and contaminated by ideology and political allegiance.²⁴⁸ If proponents of human rights are motivated to act by the exposed reality of wrongdoing as stimulus towards political action, then the veracity and authenticity of personal testimony is the most valuable – but intrinsically problematic – unit of currency. Nicholson argues that ‘the performance of memory is inevitably a political act’.²⁴⁹ Since the interview is the site of testimony production for much verbatim theatre, it is in this interview setting where the processes of memory are at their most complex and contentious when factoring in the power dynamics between teller and recipient, where the subject can be rendered *beholden* to the listener. AFHR’s script collection is above all an extractive practice, where interviews are sought and conducted by the company. Fellow documentarist Alecky Blythe attests that ‘people are flattered’ when she asks to interview

²⁴⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.

²⁴⁷ In considering the ‘truthfulness’ of memories produced as a result of generative retrieval, Eysenck and Keane list numerous examples of studies where ‘information contained in autobiographical memories produced on two different occasions differed considerably, even when accuracy was the prime goal’ (Michael W Eysenck and Mark T Keane, *Cognitive Psychology: Approaches to Cognitive Psychology* [New York: Psychology Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006], 271).

²⁴⁸ Conway and his colleagues describe the situation as follows: ‘in generative retrieval memories are actively and intentionally constructed through an interaction between the working self-goal structure and the autobiographical memory knowledge base’ See: Conway, M. A., Pleydell-Pearce, C. W., & Whitecross, S. E. 2001. ‘The neuroanatomy of autobiographical memory: A slow cortical potential study of autobiographical memory retrieval’. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 493–524. 45(3). 495.

²⁴⁹ Nicholson, *Applied Drama*, 268.

them, and she is ‘often amazed at how willing people are to tell their stories’.²⁵⁰ Blythe sees the verbatim practitioner as having an ethico-social function as receiver of stories: ‘when someone offers an attentive ear, people grab the opportunity to talk – even about personal information. You gain access to hidden worlds simply by giving a person the opportunity to speak’.²⁵¹ Luckhurst, however, highlights the ethical *dilemmas* faced by verbatim practitioners who utilise interviews: ‘If there is a particular set of ethical questions attached to acting, to writing and directing verbatim plays [it is the] many questions surrounding the extraction of information from interviewees’.²⁵² In evaluating the human rights mandate of AfHR, the power structures in such interviews suggests story-givers might expect to receive direct change or assistance in exchange for their testimony. Additionally, there is a methodological proximity to the adversarial processes of legal trials and other interrogatory structures that testifiers may have encountered before, such as asylum application procedures.

Deirdre Heddon interrogates the ideas of responsibility and accountability when ‘constructing the other’ in verbatim and testimonial performances, acknowledging the verbatim model might be ‘perceived as a democratising force within the theatre industry’ and noting this creates the opportunity to ‘solicit the unsolicited, giving those unheard voices a public place, and perhaps then rewriting the dominant narratives in the process’.²⁵³ However, for Heddon, this is shadow-play. She deconstructs the interview-to-play form, further enumerating the power dynamics within the interview event, and suggesting that testimony should properly be understood as *co*-authored, with the interviewer’s presence discernible at all times, through their prompting or filling-in of perceived gaps either during or after the event. Heddon argues that in the choice of interview subject, the bias inherent in questions

²⁵⁰ Bythe, ‘Alecky Blythe,’ 82.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Luckhurst, ‘Verbatim Theatre,’ 214.

²⁵³ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 129.

(the ‘question-wording effects’), selection of transcript material, the process of editing and redacting, and in the performance interpretation which follows, there are numerous points where testimonial agency is compromised. In an endeavour to ‘get under the rhetorical clichés of empowerment and liberation’, Heddon suggests that ‘we might nevertheless want to ask whose voice is spoken for in verbatim productions [...] since talking out is replaced in this act of ventriloquism by talking for or talking about’.²⁵⁴ As a rejoinder, Amanda Stuart Fisher asks if adoption of the voice of the other is always, by definition, exploitative, and unethical, and whether it should inevitably carry a connotation of disempowerment. She questions whether *not* speaking up for the other is itself an act of ‘political irresponsibility’ and contends that it is ‘a political undertaking to speak up for others less politically privileged’.²⁵⁵ In reference to her own testimony project, *From the Mouths of Mothers* (2007), Stuart Fisher describes her attempt to devise an ethical exchange which was also a positive, curative encounter for both parties.²⁵⁶ She argues the subjects knowingly assent to the ‘verbatim contract’ to achieve the therapeutic benefit of sending a simulacrum of themselves back into the traumatic event to ‘work through’ the trauma and thereby gain critical distance.²⁵⁷ Stuart Fisher categorised this as a ‘detour through the Other that defines the Self’.²⁵⁸ In Stuart Fisher’s practice, mirrored in Bacon’s approach, the subject-testifier enters the contract willingly.²⁵⁹ In this light, I argue for a counter-reading of Heddon’s exploitative ventriloquism, pointing instead to an act which can be interpreted as an ethical

²⁵⁴ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 129.

²⁵⁵ Stuart Fisher, ‘Continuities Lost and Found’.

²⁵⁶ *From the Mouths of Mothers* details the experiences of non-abusing parents of sexually abused children.

²⁵⁷ Stuart Fisher, ‘Continuities Lost and Found’.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ ice&fire have a published Code of Conduct, which is agreed with all interviewees that explains the processes of the interview in accessible language. All interviewees are passed the transcript of their interviews to read through and are supported in that process if required. They can then redact events, names, identifying places etc. The full performance script is sent to the testifier for them to see how their story has been used. The testifier can withdraw their story at any time. The modular nature of AfHR scripts allows for stories to be removed and replaced others – Bacon reflects this has been done twice in the history of AfHR, once for issues of safety, and another occasion when an Occupy protester felt that she sounded too ‘middle class’ when performed on stage.

substitution where the psycho-somatic act of remembering is replicated by a surrogate via the embodiment of an actor, so that the victim remains integral to themselves and is not cannibalised by the intense gaze of the public domain. In this conception, having a surrogate or stand-in body can offer a form of positive agency, ensuring that abuses do not remain hidden in circumstances where the subject is otherwise unable to access a public platform or voice to speak publicly for themselves.

Not all story-givers wish to be formally identified as advocates and participants, as Germain Nahumana has been keen to do. For some testifiers – particularly those who still face a level of physical threat in the UK²⁶⁰ – it is impractical and even potentially dangerous for them to be identified, for the witness account to be identified with the physical presence of the witness. For other story-givers, they are satisfied to have spoken ‘for the record’ and that their ‘testimony is doing work in the world’ but do not wish to return repeatedly to telling their story.²⁶¹ For Bacon, the avatar-actor, is an unconcealed simulacrum, ‘because it’s not going to be anywhere near the real person anyway’.²⁶² Thus, the mediating role of the avatar-actor guarantees an ethical practice by permitting the audience to focus with *sentience* on the story content, building a path for consciousness, rather than submitting to an unconscious empathy with a projected ‘real’ subject. Bacon argues that the AfHR approach offers a space for audiences to reflect on the wider structural and political issues without succumbing to the misplaced temptation to care for – or save – the person before them:

I have seen asylum seekers speak, and more often than not, I am very affected by that, because, I think ‘I can’t believe that you have been through what you’ve been through’, and I get so swept up in that person that I end up worrying about them,

²⁶⁰ It has particularly been the case for some of the asylum-seekers who have contributed their stories to AfHR: people who believe they are at risk of forced removal or are concerned about contact with political opponents in the UK. Wanting to remain anonymous was also paramount to many of the undocumented, black-market workers who gave their stories for the company’s testimony play, *The Illegals*.

²⁶¹ Bacon, interview (2012).

²⁶² *Ibid.*

thinking, ‘are you going to cry?’, ‘is this really hard for you to do?’, and I am sitting here feeling voyeuristic, and I want to look away, and you are very conflicted. What you are doing is focussing on the individual, and not on the story that they are telling, and I think with the format that we have developed, you recognise that’s a human being and empathise, sure, but you focus much more on the story.²⁶³

Here, Bacon suggests, in watching the avatar-actor take on the performance of what was emotionally fraught testimony, there is greater potential to focus on story content, as this theatrically trans-human presence annuls the sense of pity or discomfiture at real-life pain. Since the plays of AfHR have an explicit campaigning element, it is critical the audience are not diverted away from the consciousness of considering the wider ramifications of the human rights transgressions articulated in the narratives. In this way, my reading of AfHR’s output returns to Brecht’s concept of ‘distanciation’, to understand the space created for intellectual reflection and political provocation, through the appointment of a provisional proxy, or ‘avatar’, in the figure of the actor. Another human presence acting as an ‘alternative’ or surrogate body recalls the ‘post-human’ position of the cyborg described by feminist theorist Donna Haraway as a ‘facilitating operation in another environment’,²⁶⁴ and arguably looks forward to the provocative re-mapping of *sentience* as a transhumanist property by Sarah Spiekermann, outlined in the Introduction.²⁶⁵ This can be seen as a productive destabilisation of the idea of the unique identity of an autonomous individual, holding the prospect of a cognisant, *sentient* understanding alongside a shared psycho/somatic response, replacing the solely paralysing effects of pity or despondency with positive dialogic values of telling and listening. In this formulation, the actor, or multiple actors, taking on the same role at different times has a ‘polytheistic’ effect, becoming a

²⁶³ Bacon, interview (2015).

²⁶⁴ Donna Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,’ (1985), *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York : Routledge, 1991), 146.

²⁶⁵ See Spiekermann, ‘The Ghost of Transhumanism & the Sentience of Existence,’ (Manifesto: NZZ, June 19, 2017).

surrogate(s) who cannot be harmed, standing in for and voicing the testifier. With the avatar body, there is the possibility of reconciliation between and among testifying subject(s), actors and audiences through heightened *sentient* consciousness.

Conclusion

With their outreach programme, Actors for Human Rights, ice&fire have developed a swift and supple mechanism for enumerating and responding to urgent human rights issues; the process from page to stage can be counted in weeks, allowing a direct dialogue with still-evolving civic and political issues. The persuasive narratological construction of these plays acts to stimulate the audience's emotional investment and empathy, whilst retaining a political *sentience* – the felt-understanding that allows watchers to apprehend the larger structural issues which engender and sustain human rights abuses. This iteration of a human rights theatre is rhetorical persuasion, vibrational through the human body, conscientising the audience of another's pain. Through the semiology of the total performance event, the audience are provided with æffective cues which signal the rectitude of actions and miscarriages of justice. AfHR take their product to the people, regularly performing in non-traditional theatre spaces for spectators diverse in their awareness of the human impact of human rights abuse; predicated on an extension of the performance with pre- and post-show contextualisation intended to direct audiences towards conscious reception of the message and call-to-action. AfHR exists to promote the company's own ideologically liberal framework – human rights seen through an alter-globalist perspective – aligned with the aims of the wider UK human rights corpus. This can generate accusations of trading on easy affections and affiliations; however, I have argued the sharp-scratch intravenous reminder of human corporeality through transported words recited by the avatar-actor offer the potential

of a community of consciousness between the marginalised subject, the actor who is their medium, and the audience who witness.

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to interrogate the political, theoretical, ethical, and philosophical implications of the work – and working methods – of AfHR. The dramaturgical practice of AfHR is constructed to foreground the voiced ‘reality’ of the collected narratives, and the scripts are founded on compelling ‘truth claims’ to evoke serious consideration of the human rights norms and infractions underlying each editorial decision. The terminology of ‘verbatim’ grounds AfHR’s work in a theatrical genealogy, supplying a recognisable blueprint for audiences’ appreciation of their output, but it also exposes them to challenges to the veracity of their work. The nomenclature of ‘rehearsed-reading’ bleeds across the borders of practice, where AfHR use theatrical means to expand a *sentient* response to the *mise-en-scène* and hint at worlds outside the words. I argue that AfHR practice cannot be reduced to ‘flattened art’, but rather evinces the craft of a pared-down aesthetic which assists the stenographic transcription and transmission of reality, enveloped within a sphere of micro-performances that seek to balance emotion with activation, *pathos* with *logos*. The programme articulates a melancholic feedback loop, which draws on an archival storehouse of trauma to catalogue and replay abuse to galvanise subsequent restorative activism. This process remains both theoretically and ethically controversial; the problematic act of ‘speaking for’ the other is a persistent neon trace through the dramaturgical choices of the company’s play creation. The AfHR process is reliant on a ventriloquised representation predicated on the goal-oriented curation of a scripter engaging with a ‘traumatised subject’ who delivers politicised testimony from generative recall within an asymmetrical power-based encounter. However, as I have argued, the use of a proxy body or surrogate apparatus within an avowedly ethical framework of practice offers the

opportunity for stories to be publicly shared without inscribing further psychological damage on the testifier, challenging political paralysis by staging stories which restore social subjecthood and political justice. In this configuration of a human rights theatre, multiple modes of direct address develop conscientisation to human rights issues, the audience arrives at a consciousness of human tragedies by finally, truly, listening to the marginalised voice of the other.

Chapter Two: Senses and Sensibilities

Playing inside the Human Rights Event

Introduction

This chapter looks at examples of theatre that address human rights violations by immersing the audience/spectator within a simulation of the human rights disaster event, providing an embedded position within the *atrocities exhibition*.¹ These examples illustrate a desire by the makers to allow—if not *obligate*—audiences to ‘experience’ human rights disorder, activating a lasting response via an embodied mode of ‘knowing’. Productions discussed under this type of a human rights theatre demonstrate commonalities in approach including: a step-into immersive *mis-en-scène*; actors and audiences sharing space; sensory disruption; and shock events triggering dynamic relationships across all groups present in the world of the play. In elaborating the polysemy of the word ‘consciousness’ developed throughout this essay, this chapter continues to explore the idea of *sentience* as ‘felt-understanding’ as a mode of engagement in human rights theatre. I consider the ways theatre-makers have sculpted their immersive *mis-en-scène* to radically deploy *sentience* as a process towards consciousness, often through engendering an ‘altered’ state of consciousness. The concerns and practices of aestheticised space bring into sharper focus the idea of *sentience* as an architecture to contain notions of susceptibility to sensation, felt-understanding, somatic empathy, and emotional contagion.

¹ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto, 1998), 8. This reference also picks up JG Ballard's phrase used in his novel of 1970.

This chapter highlights the biopolitics and ethical stresses which occur when theatre-makers try to recreate a human rights disaster situation. Their claims to simulate the disaster moment, risk exposure as ontologically, theatrically, and politically deficient. This chapter analyses the compound dramaturgical and ethical fissures that transpire when audiences are co-opted into ‘pretending’ in the same world as the actors, into performing acts of ‘witness’ for a series of disaster simulations. Examining the intention to confront the ineffability of the traumatic schism of disaster through sensation and somatic experience, this chapter finds the effect upon the spectator is often to re-entrench individual audience-members’ personal sense of security, at the expense of experiencing communal trauma and the potential re-assertion of human rights redress. Audiences are responsabilised for reproduced events but ultimately left with an irresolvable liminoid experience.² I argue in this chapter that attempts to place the theatre audience *within* catastrophe, as an implicated witness, create a problematic mode of watching, both morally and dramaturgically. Efforts to immerse audiences in human rights crises engender theatrical and ethical dilemmas in the act of spectatorship that threaten to overwhelm the very socio-political concerns portrayed.

This chapter focusses on the work of two theatre-makers. In Part One, I look at Steve Lambert and Badac Theatre, and the plays *The Factory* (2008), *The Box* (2016), and *The Journey* (2018); then, in Part Two, *Fallujah* (2007) and *Katrina* (2009) by Jonathan Holmes and his company Jericho House. Both makers have tackled topics which have defined the human rights discourse of the past century: migration and asylum, incarceration and racial discrimination, disaster, warfare, and genocide. Commonly, Lambert and Holmes attempt to

² In 1974, Victor Turner coined the term liminoid to refer to experiences that have characteristics of liminal experiences but are optional and do not involve a resolution of a personal crisis. Unlike liminal events, liminoid experiences are conditional and do not result in a change of status. The liminoid is a break from society, part of ‘play’ or ‘playing’. Events in the ‘experience economy’ are optional activities of leisure that place both the spectator and the performer in-between places outside of society's norms.

foster extreme arousal in their audience to move beyond the simultaneous instrumentalisation and abstraction of testimony, and even beyond the legibility of conventionally sequenced storytelling, with the objective of inspiring the watcher towards ethical action. I analyse Holmes's explicit desire to 'implicate the audience viscerally in the action',³ and Lambert's deliberate placing of the audience 'where they can react physically to the piece, where the piece will overwhelm them physically',⁴ as potentially productive strategies for articulating human rights issues. In concentrating on these artists, I chart the routes of practice that inform their view of immersive work, strands intimately related but with significant differences of genesis and emphasis. Lambert draws heavily on practice informed by the writings of Antonin Artaud, and the ritualised and somatic processes of Jerzy Grotowski.⁵ Holmes operates more within a visual arts-based tradition, deploying the manipulation of site and the idea of 'spectacle' to make multi-modal assemblages intended to impact the viewer through a range of entry points. Whilst there are many similarities between the makers, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach of Holmes and the stark ascetism of Lambert make for provocative divergences throughout this chapter.

This chapter builds on the long historical tradition of performers sharing spaces and light with their audiences to arrive at contemporary ideas of site-specific and immersive theatre. Interdisciplinary theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Jacques Rancière and Jean Baudrillard are deployed to contextualise founding ideas behind immersive and site-based work. I also use Erika Fischer-Lichte's writing on the capacity for sensitisation of the space between actor and audience in pursuit of democratic and communitarian results to interrogate

³ Jonathan Holmes, 'Jericho House: About us,' March 19, 2010, B, <http://www.jerichohouse.org.uk/2010/about.html>

⁴ Steve Lambert, 'Interview with Steve Lambert,' interview by Annecy Lax, London, March 3, 2020.

⁵ Looking specifically at Artaud's 'The Theatre and the Plague', 1938, and Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968.

fundamental questions about the exchanges of power in the examples surveyed. Drawing on theatre scholarship by Fiona Wilkie, Adam Alston, Josephine Machon and Baz Kershaw, this chapter poses corollary questions about the genesis of work which performs disaster and atrocity as part of an immersive experience, the capacities, and limitations of the aesthetic frame to provide passage into traumatic alternative realities, and the challenges inherent in privileging sensation in a hierarchy of knowing. I examine in detail the development processes of Lambert and Holmes, their working methods, dramaturgical choices, and performance modes. My examination of the methodologies and motivations is built on first-person interviews, repeated observations of their practice, and presence at discussion events. To date, scholarly analysis of both *Badac* and *Jericho House* is relatively limited, and therefore I use numerous contemporary reports, continuing a methodology of using informal critical cultures to build a more complete picture.⁶

I continue to explore consciousness as a processual, procedural, and durational happening in these plays. This chapter elaborates one of the central research questions of my thesis which explores the ‘æffect’ of activist art, and further examines the ways in which makers of human rights theatre aim to amplify both *affective* and *effective* qualities in their work.⁷ This chapter builds upon my framework of human rights theatre as possessing three key features: firstly, the works depict real-world political events, highlighting the role of the state in endangering its citizens; secondly, moral, and ethical ruptures are encountered within and without the drama through the dramatisation of victim/perpetrator dynamics. Finally,

⁶ I point readers to the bibliography for Megson’s published interview with Holmes on verbatim theatre, Young’s short sketch of the use of verbatim in *Fallujah* and Garson’s examination of the play in *Beyond Documentary Realism*, which predominantly focuses on the piece’s ‘Aesthetic Transgressions’, but Garson’s useful case-study is drawn upon throughout.

⁷ ‘That is to say: before we act in the world, we must be moved to act. We might think of this as: Affective Effect or, if you prefer: Effective Affect. Or, using the grapheme æ, we can encompass both affect and effect by creating a new word: Æffect’. See: Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert, *Why Artistic Activism* (New York: The Center for Artistic Activism, 2018). 3.

these plays characteristically aspire to produce an activist effect on the collective behaviours of the audience. The productions of Lambert and Holmes aim to achieve political *sentience* through a deliberate, ‘political suspension of the ethical’ that subsumes agency in the audience in favour of the attempt to ignite consciousness.⁸ Assertive practices designed to induce the *embodiment* of atrocity to provoke ‘feeling’ are the objective and *modus operandi*. Rejecting claims of ethical *antimony*, the political work of manufactured sensation is explicitly intended to prevent further disaster and trauma. The ‘political suspension’ found in the immersive and site work of these makers deprioritises considered stakeholder-led ethical engagement, for new dramaturgical codes that insist audiences experience the suffering of others.

Given the porosity of the immersive theatre mode, and the opportunities for interaction and interjection by the audience, this chapter asks questions about the political efficacy of using this performance form to explore human rights issues. Here again we encounter the tensions that characterise human rights theatre’s relationship to the ‘real’ and the ways in which invited guests can contaminate the fidelity of the theatre-maker’s vision. This chapter also asks questions about the viewing experience in the plays of Holmes and Lambert, and the way in which it contributes to the creation and collapse of temporary communities through their work. There are complex issues of ‘liveness’ at play throughout the chapter. The makers’ shared conviction that for their work to have traction the presence of bodies together in the same room is necessary to create an æffective environment is shown as complex. Furthermore, this chapter examines how the makers intentionally engender fear, and considers the potential for this emotion to generate either a communal, intersubjective

⁸ Tomlin, Liz. “A ‘political suspension of the ethical’: To Be Straight With You (2007) and An Evening With Psychosis (2009).” *Performing Ethos: International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance*. 1 (2), 167-180. (September 2010). 167.

vision among their audience, or a more narcissistic sense of competition and self-preservation. The shock and horror of the immersive experience can mean individual encounters are prioritised over careful examination of the macro-causality of state-sponsored human rights abuses. Related to questions around the makers' deployment of fear, this chapter also examines their strategy of inducing emotional contagion to duplicate and heighten *sentient* response through live spectacle and proximity.

In this chapter which focusses on plays, constructed along the lines of narrative journeys, for general theatre-going publics, I am also concerned with the practice of theatrical work, labour, and transaction throughout this chapter, in particular thinking about the processes of paying for a simulated experience of disaster, atrocity, and trauma. Here I draw on Holmes and Lambert's thoughts about the role and obligations of the audience, in particular a rejection of what is deemed 'passive spectatorship' and 'voyeurism'. Both makers insist audiences are required to 'work', in apparent compensation for the dramatised suffering, and to repay a debt incurred through the simulation of human rights abuses. This chapter does not depart altogether from the concerns of the previous section, as we find a predominance of 'testimony' within the plays of both artists. In Holmes' work the monoglossic arrangements of verbatim theatre examined in the previous chapter are intentionally displaced by motion, promenade, and the carnivalesque. The 'testimony' that Lambert uses in his plays is typically pared back to a collection of phrases and shaped into a dramaturgy that repeats and circles around the physical labour prioritised in performance. In relation to Lambert's adoption of Grotowskian practice, I pose questions about how this hyper-performance and fetishisation of the body *in extremis* converses with the abuse of the human rights of the victims depicted in the plays. This creates an analogous state, not just to the physical duress of the depicted victims, but also to the severity of emotional and

psychological trauma, where the audience are implicated and responsabilised in an act of co-construction with the actors, this chapter asks if this creates a disproportionate demand on the viewer, or one never intended to be met.

PART ONE - Badac Theatre

Introduction

I have yet to attend a performance by Badac Theatre where someone does not walk out, or faint. Sometimes there is a combination of the two responses, a staggered elopement, often doggedly following the walls, tripping over bags and cabling, or breaking across the action on stage in an attempt to escape this place. Disoriented, overwhelmed, the audience finds their cognition protesting, their bodies objecting. Theatrical asylum seekers. The rest of us in the audience, standing scattered around the drama unfolding in the centre of the space, watch this little performance of human response flare up and burn down. ‘That’s *brilliant!*’ says Badac founder, Steve Lambert, in our interview, ‘They forget where they are, they forget and they go down because they are so immersed in something, so caught up in the rhythm of the piece. That’s a mark for us’.¹ For Lambert, the faint, the collapse of bodily autonomy is a mode of participation; this physical surrender is a ‘mark’ of involvement that transcends observation and indicates corporeal effect and the affective arousal of his work. What interests me here, in contrast to Lambert’s triumphal take, is also reading the faint as a *loss* of consciousness, diverging from the consciousness-raising model of human rights theatre we saw in the previous chapter, and the wider collective consciousness of the human rights project.

In this section, I expand out from arguing the faint is not a case of ‘forgetting’ place as Lambert conceives, but amongst an ecology of corporeal ‘shock and awe’ responses stimulated by Badac’s work, it is the result of intentional hyper-animation and orchestrated

¹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2020.

sensitisation of the playing space, creating irreconcilable phrenic and somatic responses in the audience. In exploring the intentions behind wanting to ‘involve’ and ‘immerse’ the audience in the performance of human rights theatre in this chapter, I repeatedly return to the question of what happens when the viewer is pushed out of the frame, when dramaturgy becomes severed, when the world of the play is rejected physically by the audience. In my extended interview with Lambert, he recalled, ‘we’ve had people put their head down for about an hour, just literally put their head down’.² Though Lambert welcomes this as proof of the power of his theatre, I use this hunched-over image to ask wider questions about whether this is a bowing of the head in deference to the significance of the story, or a blinding. This chapter is encircled by an enquiry about whether provoking an overwrought affective response demonstrates theatrical failure, or a ‘mark’ of *sentient* transference into the body of the viewer that transcends conventional theatre spectatorship. I argue in the Introduction of this thesis that ‘human rights theatre’ can be described as possessing three conditions, firstly that a real-world political issue is being articulated, that moral and ethical ruptures are encountered, and lastly that the play event seeks to have *activist* effect on the collective behaviours of the audience. Understood in these terms, we can analyse the work of Badac as a human rights theatre that intends to disrupt, to provoke audience response by bringing them into emphatic proximity with disaster, atrocity, and human emptying. In Badac productions, the moral and ethical rupture is both within and without, moved out of the matrixed and aesthetic world of the play and into the relational world of the audience.

In the context of performance, the manipulation of ‘site’ represents a dislocation which forces us to look at text and content anew.³ Following the minimalist art movement of

² Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2020.

³ For Nick Kaye, ‘site’ in art-making contexts is not an equivalence for a specific location but expresses the dynamic engagement between the work of art and a reworking of, or the removal from, the ‘local’ or ‘original position’ that customarily defines identity and significance. Miwon Kwon argues the drive for site-specificity is

the 1960s, Nick Kaye examines how meaning is impacted when normative concepts of object/place or event/place are disrupted, emphasising a 'transitive definition of site' one 'forcing a self-conscious perception'.⁴ Fiona Wilkie urges an emendation to the common comprehension of 'site-specific' practice, relevant to the case-studies of Badac and Jericho House, that 'site-specific' work is no longer purely concerned with articulating the way space becomes charged with a specific identity of place, replaced instead by preoccupations of 'an active rethinking of how site is constituted'.⁵ Both Lambert and Holmes style their work as imagistic, experiential, and visceral, where audience collection at the site and shifting boundaries of relationships within the site, form the conditions for the most resonant political exploration of the human rights atrocities replayed. The agitation is embedded in the form and process of the work, the disturbances experienced in psychic sanctity (through glimpses, echoes, intervals, repetitions), and even the compromise to our physical safety (through disorientation, separation, bombardment, confrontation) are theatrical tools used within site-specific and immersive work to keep us off-balance, attentive, and thus conscientised and conscious members of the community. Through this transposition and spatial indoctrination, it is hoped audiences might stand amidst and surrounded by experiences that not even high-definition 24-hour rolling news can evoke. Wilkie maintains that through such transposition and site-substitution, a space of anonymity and apparent 'placelessness' might effectively be expanded 'to allow for ambiguity and multiplicity' and to become a portal to another world.⁶ Offering the possibility of commutation to another community whose narratives are imperative to our understanding of the human rights issues set before us. Theatre production

to 'forge more complex and fluid possibilities for the art-site relationship while simultaneously registering the extent to which the very concept of the site has become destabilized' (Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.) 2), where the 'physical condition of a specific location recedes as the primary element in the conception of a site' (Ibid., 27), instead for Kwon's thesis, site work is animated through the viewer relationships created in each unique event/place nexus.

⁴ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

⁵ Fiona Wilkie, *Performance, Transport and Mobility: Making Passage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁶ Fiona Wilkie, 'The Production of 'Site': Site-Specific Theatre,' in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, ed. Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 100.

away from conformity of *placedness* might open potential for radical political theatre, finding greater ‘permeability’ with audiences. Badac’s *The Factory* and Jericho House’s *Fallujah* are examples of ‘site-specific’ works which play out narratives of conflict and suffering in proximate spatial relationships amongst audience members, even though the pieces are not directly ‘responsive’ to the architecture, history, identity, or vibrations of their performance locations. For Lambert, working in alternative, non-theatre building spaces is a way to connect ‘ordinary’ people with human rights issues, ‘people that are not necessarily from a theatre background’, making a place where ‘these audiences are sharing the space with the work, we are inviting them inside this world’.⁷

Lambert wryly rejects academic theorisation of his work, ‘it’s a total load of bollocks’ he laughingly surmises.⁸ Lambert highlights elite education as a mechanism for making urgent issues paralysed and abstruse, delaying our awakening to important world events by tying up the process in queries about appropriateness, laybys on the use of language and quibbles about representation. He consistently censors himself if he feels his description of his theatre is desiccating into ‘middle-class bollocks’.⁹ ‘These are conversations that people who don’t live in my world have’ Lambert states in our discussion about cultural ownership, ‘[t]hey sit around drinking coffee, coming up with this stuff about hierarchies and appropriation, and I’m the one actually going to a refugee camp’.¹⁰ And there is evidence in two decades of reviews and articles to support Lambert’s view that Badac’s most profound detractors are those who dance ethics on pinheads, turn sensations into words – ‘the concerted atrocity of BADAC’ despaired theatre-maker Chris Goode revelling in his

⁷ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

Badac Theatre have produced several site-works and also plays in community centres and multi-purpose art and cultural centres, with a programme of touring work to the mid-scale theatre venue circuit.

⁸ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

schadenfreude at *The Cry* being cancelled in 2010¹¹ – and those for whom theatre must consciously perform its very *theatreness*, continually flashing its fictive qualities in order to be a valid proposition. Badac has consistently earned better reception in smaller civic arts centres, community venues, in schools, in the writings-up of local papers where shaken arts reporters return high-star reviews (*The Box* is a performance that will remain with you for days, weeks or maybe even years. I am still speaking about it to everyone, and so will you' declares reviewer Maria Dimova.¹² Badac are the Millwall Football club of theatre, the chant of 'no one likes us, and we don't care', pulsates through their performances, 'if they never come back, fine, that's their choice. That's exactly what I want' Lambert shrugs.¹³ Lambert's world is one that sweeps books off the table, prizes action, viscerality, presence and commitment, one that activates a range of obligations yoking the company to the story, the audience to the actors, the performance to the body. Across and back again. A network of pinging wires.

Founding of Badac Theatre

Badac Theatre was established in 1999 by Steve Lambert and Daniel Robb, under the banner heading of 'extreme political art' in order to 'explore human rights issues and abuses'.¹⁴

Furthermore, as an actor, Lambert felt he was not seeing the kind of theatre he believed was important. There were not the roles for his acting style and profile, 'I wanted to do more, to

¹¹ Chris Goode, 'Edinburgh diary 2010: #5,' August 16, 2010, accessed January 2020, <https://beescope.blogspot.com/2010/08/edinburgh-diary-2010-5.html?m=0>.

Chris Goode demonstrated that his own moral arbitration was deeply flawed when, amongst other accusations of abuse, his theatre company had to undertake a significant restructure after a safeguarding review found serious breaches of ethical protocols in keeping performers safe during simulated sex-scenes.

¹² Maria Dimova, 'Everything Theatre,' January 16, 2017, accessed November 07, 2020, <http://everything-theatre.co.uk/2017/01/the-box-drapeer-hall-review.html>

¹³ Steve Lambert, 'Progetto Crossing Path - Steve Lambert, dell' Argine, Il Teatro,' November 3, 2011.

¹⁴ Badac Theatre, 'Bio,' January 01, 2017, <https://www.badactheatre.com/about>

be in charge. I wanted control' he grins, aware of the auteur label that statement affixes.¹⁵ Since its inception, Badac has produced more than 15 plays which have toured around the UK and Europe. A third of their work has focussed on the Holocaust, a primal scene of return for the company: their first play *Ashes to Ashes*, devised for an Edinburgh Fringe run in 1999, was followed the next year by *Crucifixion* (2000), *The March* (2002), and *The Forgotten/The Devoured* (2009), all examining the extermination camps of Nazi Germany. The company's works also include *Cage* (2005) and *Whore* (2006) about domestic violence against women, *Lunatics* (2007) and *The Cry* (2010) focussing on physical torture and *Al Nakba* (2011) drawing a line between the 1948 'catastrophe' of displacement of the Palestinian people and the twenty-first century bombings of Gaza. More recently the company made the piece *Anna* (2012) restaging the murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, and *The Flood* (2014) blowing open the socio-economic inequalities that exacerbated death and injury in World War I. For the purposes of this chapter, I draw on two of their more recent plays, *The Journey* (2018), about the refugee flight caused by the bombing of Syria, and *The Box* (2016), concerned with the use of solitary confinement in prisons. I largely focus on Badac's most notorious and discussed piece, *The Factory* (2008) which saw the company return to reanimating the events of Auschwitz. I am using as the starting point the main tenets articulated in the establishing manifesto for Badac Theatre: -

1. To produce new theatre work that is concentrated around human rights issues.
2. To create this work using a mixture of improvisation, new writing and extensive research.
3. To develop our work by exploring and using the theatre philosophies of both Jerzy Grotowski and Antonin Artaud.

¹⁵ Lambert, *Progetto Crossing Path*, 2011.

All of Badac's work is created with the intention of exploring what human rights abuses are and what they actually mean to the INDIVIDUAL.¹⁶

This chapter alights on Badac's aims to investigate questions of how immersion, proximity with the audience and sensitisation of the space have been used by theatre-makers looking to amplify and activate human rights concerns. This part of the enquiry analyses how these human rights theatres use form and space to stimulate susceptibility to sensation, and how dynamic spatial relationships – to the action of the play, to performers, to other audience members – can be used to provoke a *sentient* response. In this section I will look at the dramaturgy of Badac's theatre, before returning to explore how their stated interest in the *affect* upon the 'INDIVIDUAL' has shaped the company's approach and output. The section on Badac concludes with an assessment of the efficacy of the company's aesthetic choices in communicating human rights issues. Firstly, I consider how Badac's reference to both Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933-99) has guided their use of space, interaction with their audiences and the construction of the *mis-en-scène*. Both well-analysed theatre luminaries sought to hyper-animate the affective qualities of the relationships formed and performed in the theatrical event. As Artaud envisioned:

It is in order to attack the spectator's sensibility on all sides that we advocate a revolving spectacle which, instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators.¹⁷

Badac takes on this mandate to examine what happens to the portrayal of atrocity when worlds are brought together, when the audience physically, corporeally enter the world of the play. Though the work of Artaud and Grotowski was not solely in the service of addressing real-world political issues – save for Grotowski's *Akropolis*, which I give room to as a

¹⁶ Badac Theatre, 'About Us,' 01 January 2005, accessed January 01, 2009, <https://www.badactheatre.com/about>

¹⁷ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 86.

comparator piece to Badac's *The Factory* – this chapter elucidates some of the political reverberations they established by dynamically changing the nature of contact and connection within live performance, and the ideological potential of attempting to nurture 'ideo-affective formations', *sentient* formations in my terms, and thus new consciousness within audience groups.¹⁸ To illustrate something of how Badac have applied Artaud's edict to 'attack the audience's sensibility on all sides' and to spread 'visual and sonorous outbursts', I turn to a personal recollection of Badac's work.

Watching The Box

A whispering and jittery audience surround a large metal cage in the centre of the black floored stage. This still feels transgressive. To be invited on to the playing space. To be so close to the performer. To catch the eyes of other audience members through the metal cage, waiting as if behind bars. Steve Lambert as the prisoner is already on the stage, patrolling back and forth like a rolling ball of iron, pacing, 'like a dirty, fucking animal'.¹⁹ He ignores the audience, no welcome, no acknowledgement, just the static bursts of his mutterings, 'Stop it, stop it, stop it' he says over and over, 'stop fucking talking to yourself'.²⁰ This is *The Box*, toured by Badac Theatre in 2016, highlighting human rights issues connected to the treatment of prisoners in solitary confinement. This piece which took two years for Lambert to research and develop, and involved visiting Category A prisons in the UK, was supposed to feature a female prisoner as the lead protagonist, but the company 'just couldn't find a female that actually wanted to do it'.²¹ The ceaseless cacophony of electric buzzers, shouting and banging, and doors slamming builds and builds until I am aware that my whole body is

¹⁸ Donald Nathanson, 'From Empathy to Community,' *Annual of Psychoanalysis* 25 (1997): 127.

¹⁹ Steve Lambert, 'The Box', Unpublished script, 2016.

²⁰ Lambert, *The Box*.

²¹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

rattling. Lambert continues to stalk the perimeters of the cage, shouting in disbelief, in anger, in repentance, in rebellion, in mistrust of his own sanity. ‘Is this real’ the prisoner repeatedly asks, ‘tell me, tell me, is this real, what I hear, what I see, tell me is it real, is it fucking real?’ questioning insistently, but not directly to us.²² The implied answer must be held within, no opening available to halt the unravelling of a man against a ceaseless stream of consciousness, no help we can offer, despite our proximity. As the prisoner starts experiencing monstrous visions, his body ricocheting around his cage, there is a communal sense that we are reaching the endgame, the audience looking grimmer and ghostlier as they shrink back into the shadows and away from sharing the light with the performer. Suddenly there is darkness, and the relentless clanging noises of the prison are muted to an audible release of breath in the people standing next to me. Then the lights snap back on and instead of Lambert’s eyes we see blooded hollows, his cheeks shining red with the victory of his labours. The prisoner has found a way to stop the visions and he roars in triumph. The ‘sickness’ has been drawn out of the body. Two meters away from me somebody faints.

A recurring motif for Badac’s work is the construction of sickening blitzkrieg on-stage action to light the fragility of the human physicality and psyche, to play out the compound levels and layers of destruction in the annihilation of ‘normal’ lives – the moral and ethical rupture that I have argued characterises human rights theatre. For Lambert, citing the plays of Shakespeare to illustrate his point, normality exists outside of the theatre, whereas drama should be ‘**D**ramatic’. All else is entertainment, pabulum and comfort. In our interview, and repeated elsewhere, he offers an example of medical interventions in mental health where doctors will work to adjust parapsychological response to exist within a ‘normal range’, with two parallel white lines denoting mood that we should not dip below, nor above,

²² Lambert, *The Box*.

if we are to be ‘normal’.²³ ‘It occurred to me that *art* should never exist within the two white lines, theatre shouldn't spend any of its time between those two white lines’, Lambert explained as context to his challenging material and confrontational style.²⁴ He extends the vertiginousness and velocity of his creative worlds out through the performances of the actors, to manufacture respondent forms of affect in the audience. For Lambert ‘it's vital everybody understands that for not one moment the audience should be within those two white lines, they have to be outside of those white lines for it to be worthwhile drama’.²⁵ This edict can be seen to align to Artaud’s comments about the ‘attack’ on the feelings of the spectator, yet leans towards Alex DeLarge in *A Clockwork Orange*, awaiting his aversion therapy, his eyes clamped wide open. Lambert is a maker that seeks a high-level of interposition in the audience’s response to his work. Throughout this section I continue to explore his techniques to bring the audience to somatic and *sentient* response, but first I analyse his relationship to Artaud to better understand the intentions of his human rights theatre.

Indebted to Artaud

On their website Badac paraphrases Antonin Artaud as saying, ‘I call for actors burning at the stakes, laughing at the flames’.²⁶ And indeed, watching Steve Lambert perform, I witness the multiple ways he willingly puts his body at stake, his attempts to somatically manifest conflagration, his physical labours to create intensity. In the preface to *The Theatre and its Double*, wherefrom this quotation is taken,²⁷ Artaud expounds on the theatre’s potential to

²³ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2020.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Badac Theatre, ‘Artists,’ 01 January, 2017, accessed January 05, 2020, <https://www.badactheatre.com/artists>.

²⁷ Grotowski quotes this as, ‘Actors should be like martyrs burnt alive, still signalling to us from their stakes’. See: Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 93.

move beyond being a ‘recording organism’ – such as I have observed in the work of testimony practitioners in the previous chapter – and instead working to reach the ‘fragile, fluctuating centre’ that is the totality of the subjective and unique experience of living.²⁸ In this essay, ‘The Theatre and Culture’, Artaud speaks to ‘we’, indexing a wider conception of theatre space and the theatre event, and argues artists should leave behind dallying with ‘forms’, and instead to be as if tortured at the stake and signalling from the pyre.²⁹ Lambert’s rendering of Artaud’s words foregrounds the work of the performer, but the above translation conjures up interaction, a more intricate network of what it means to be involved in the co-collaboration of making theatre, as actors, but also as audiences, and at a wider societal level where the spectre of theatre exists in the world. Alston describes Artaud as a theoriser of ‘proto-immersive theatre’ looking to ‘jolt audiences out of docility’.³⁰ It is this conceptualisation of the act of co-creation and the multidirectional work necessitated to forge these complex relationships which interests me in Badac’s Theatre. I ask: what does it mean to the enumeration of human rights issues to have the story, the event populated, or even co-created, with co-actants in multidirectional relationships? What might it mean to signal ‘from the pyre’ in human rights theatre – what does it mean to sign from the place that is already amid destruction, where the chance of change is diminished? Therefore, who are we signalling towards? Particularly for Badac’s work, what does it mean for the felt-understanding of *sentience*, for an achieved consciousness of human rights issues for us all ‘to be as if tortured’?³¹

²⁸ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 13.

²⁹ Antonin Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 10. The quotation from the original French is as follows and, in my unpacking, I use the translations from both Mary Caroline Richards and Victor Corti to get to the meaning of ‘au lieu d’être comme des suppliciés que l’on brûle et qui font des signes sur leurs bûchers’ (Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double*, 10).

³⁰ Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

³¹ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 13.

In referencing the company's debt to Artaud, Lambert tells me his focus is 'Theatre and the Plague',³² stating, 'all of our work is about me trying to understand that chapter. Which for 20 years I've tried to do, nothing else really, nothing goes outside of that, I'm just trying to create and recreate what he says in there'.³³ Artaud's work has garnered attention from critical theorists and philosophers for its metaphoric capacity to explore responses to art,³⁴ but even though the essay has the activating verve of a manifesto, there is little within his writings that provides the reader with information about how that theatre is made. Indeed, Artaud's lecture is told as a seedy peek down plague-drenched Marseille streets, where the inhabitants 'seeking out and snatching sinful pleasure from the dying or even the dead, half-crushed under the pile of corpses' wander around in a world of unreliable epidemiology, enumerating his extended metaphor of the twinning of the processes of transmissible disease and the potential for social and emotional contagion.³⁵ 'Above all we must agree stage acting is a delirium like the plague, and is communicable' Artaud asserts.³⁶ I contend the concept of transmissibility contained in Artaud's elaborate nightmarish vision is the pertinent connection to Badac's theatre where the audience cluster around the playing out of horrific or lamentable action. There is a conviction proximity in space and a corporeally saturated sense of place contributes towards a shared vision, the ideas 'snaking' between the audience members to develop an intersubjective consciousness.³⁷ In knotting the audience members together around the human rights disaster moment, Badac aspires to bring us *sentient* to a collective

³² 'Theatre and the Plague' was originally presented as a lecture in 1934, included in *The Theatre and its Double*, 1938

³³ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

³⁴ Alongside Derrida's writings on Artaud, we can also turn to Deleuze and Guattari's use of Artaud's 'Body without Organs' as a developing metaphor through their work as the 'wilderness where the decoded runs free' drawn from Artaud's radio play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947):

When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions
and restored him to his true freedom

³⁵ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁷ Artaud says elsewhere in *The Theatre and Its Double*, 'I propose to treat the spectators like the snakecharmer's subjects and conduct them by means of their organisms to an apprehension of the subtlest notions' (*ibid.*, 81).

understanding and motivation about those conflicts and horrors. There are further correlations. Later in the same essay, Artaud advances that ‘theatre, like the plague, is made in the image of this slaughter, this essential division. It unravels conflicts, liberates powers, releases potential and if these and the powers are dark, this is not the fault of the plague or theatre, but life’, and here I trace another discernible connection to Badac’s work;³⁸ Lambert locating responsibility for audience reaction or critical comment not with his narratives, nor with his construction of *mise-en-scène*, but because his work mirrors the brutalities of ‘life’. ‘So, who really gives a fuck about whether the audience goes ‘I like that’? I don’t give a fuck whether someone ‘likes’ or doesn’t like my work because that’s not why I make my work,’ Lambert asserts when I ask him if he is ever concerned about any discomfort caused to viewers, citing the repeated use of ‘harrowing’ as a descriptor of Badac’s work. ‘I think certainly in the human rights field, whether an audience has a ‘nice time’ means nothing’ Lambert emphasises, ‘[t]o me, that’s a ludicrous concept’.³⁹ For Lambert, talking about human rights issues, the theatre vocabulary (and the vocabulary for talking about theatre) must also reach into extreme languages, in talking about the need for civic and political regulation, we must perform the state of dysregulation. Lambert aligns with Artaud that if theatre is to ‘unravel conflict’, then an audience will encounter ‘dark powers’; the medium cannot be blamed for bringing us the message. Maintaining an ethical purview and responsibility over the welfare and agency of the audience is not necessarily to weasel on your passions, nor water-down your message. Looking after one’s audience is not the same as ensuring they have a ‘nice time’. But for Lambert to consider the comfort of the viewer is certainly to dilute the ‘true’ vocation of the theatre. There is, I argue, and as I continue to analyse below, an ethical dilemma in theatre which sets psycho/somatic challenges for the

³⁸ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 21.

³⁹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

audience when restaging eschatological real-world atrocities, an ethical fissure that can defy the very human rights agenda being explored.

Throughout my discussion of Badac, I am interested in their explication of the socio-ethical values of immersion into sensitised environments. Whilst elsewhere much is discussed about whether the theatre can provide a ‘safe space’ and what that might mean for ideas and inhabitants, Lambert aligns with Artaud’s thoughts in ‘The Theatre and the Plague’, that the theatre provides ventilation to troubling ideas and a sealed environment to explore those ‘dark powers’.⁴⁰ In human rights theatre which seeks æffect in igniting activist potential through the animation of our *sentience* to induce our consciousness, it is fundamental the horrors, the politics, are *not* just left in the theatre. Unlike Artaud’s contained explorations and explosions, Badac want the audience to become ‘vulnerable’ to experience, to carry the pain and brutality of what they have witnessed back out of the theatre and onto the streets. To leave with the affect of the ‘messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds’ stuck to them, their own ‘bodies turning towards’ the resonant issue.⁴¹ Lambert points to *Ashes to Ashes* as demonstration of the political awakening which occurs in his work; the play has been seen by over 13,000 students since its inception and is a regular fixture of Holocaust education events.⁴² Indeed, *What’s On* declared, ‘Badac’s ASHES TO ASHES is humane, political art of the highest order’, and the *Jewish Chronicle* praised the play for its portrayal of ‘the strength of human spirit’, and

⁴⁰ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 21.

⁴¹ Sara Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects,’ in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 30-31.

⁴² *Ashes to Ashes* is undoubtedly one of Badac’s most successful pieces and has been toured every year since it was first performed in 1999. Lambert noted that often private schools were more tolerant of the brutal subject matter and language of the piece, ‘So, for *Ashes to Ashes*. We can go into state school, but there are certain things that we have to square. Like the nudity. We would have to remove that, but in a private school they just don’t care, they’d have no problems with the swearing at all’. See: Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert.

pointing to the instructional dimension of the work, concluded, 'If you are only ever going to see one play about the Holocaust, in my view, it should be this one'.⁴³

Lambert never references the better-known discourse of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' in the context of his own work. This was a paradigm Artaud repeatedly explored but defies Lambert's analysis. It would be unseemly for a theatre involved in human rights to prioritise cruelty, but I can identify in Badac's sensuous 'extreme politic theatre' Artaud's postulation from the 'Theatre of Cruelty' that theatre must be 'rebuilt' upon the 'idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits' and the apperception that, 'the public thinks first of all with its senses'.⁴⁴ The affective currents in the room push us to our limits, watching as buckets of bloody meat are repeatedly sloshed onto the table in Badac's *The Flood*, or as huge metal sheets are hammered over our heads in *Al Nakba*, or the prisoner tears his eyes out Greek-style in *The Box*; 'this cruelty', Artaud cautioned, 'will be bloody when necessary'.⁴⁵ In early pronouncements, Lambert conceptualised Badac's role as peeling back the layers of corporatised comfort and cloistered thinking to reveal the raw truth underneath. For Badac, the unmasked truth is that 'violence infects every aspect of the human state, that it is as vital to human existence as is the air people breathe or the food they eat. Without violence there's nothing'.⁴⁶ I understand Badac's proclamations as an experiment in replicating the essence of violence found in Artaud's manifesto, where corporeal violence will be at the service of 'violence of thought' in the theatre.⁴⁷ Badac asserting, '[t]o approach this "Theatre of Violence" their work must be extreme'.⁴⁸ In the opening section of *The Factory* there is an

⁴³ Badac Theatre, 'Ashes to Ashes Reviews,' January 1, 2018, accessed January 1, 2020, <https://www.badactheatre.com/ashes-to-ashes-reviews>

⁴⁴ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 85.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 122.

⁴⁶ Badac Theatre, 'About Us.'

⁴⁷ Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 82.

⁴⁸ Badac Theatre, 'About Us.'

extended scene of a female prisoner being beaten; each time the action has concluded, it begins again, for what is felt (or certainly, what several reviewers felt) as beyond necessary to communicate the message. The duration and the needlessness are the very ‘messages’

Lambert wants to convey:

THE BEATING LASTS FOR A PROLONGED PERIOD OF TIME. DURING THE BEATING THE GUARDS DO NOT SPEAK THEY JUST INFLICT THE VIOLENCE. IT IS FEROCIOUS. DURING THE BEATING THE WOMAN PRISONER IS HIT FOUR TIMES. EACH TIME SHE IS HIT SHE REACTS BY SCREAMING AND COLLAPSING TO THE FLOOR. SHE THEN GETS UP AND WAITS FOR THE NEXT HIT. THIS BEATING IS BRUTAL. VIOLENT. EXTREME.⁴⁹

The mantra of ‘without violence there’s nothing’ was pivoted, spun back to criticise the work of the company in the furore that greeted *The Factory* at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2008. The celebration of violence in the company’s mission was quietly dropped. Maybe it was, like making an Artaudian theatre, an impossible project.⁵⁰ In analysing the intention and formation of Badac’s theatre, I now turn to Lambert’s other cited influence, Jerzy Grotowski, to help understand the composition of the mis-en-scène.

Reworking Grotowski

Artaud’s ideas in the *Theatre and its Double* are not conceived as a cohesive system of theatre practice. In Grotowski’s analysis of Artaud, the proposals were ‘astounding prophecies’ of a ‘theatre transcending discursive reason’, but they ‘had little methodological meaning’, and were paradoxical and unplayable.⁵¹ And unplayable for Badac. While sharing

⁴⁹ Lambert, *The Factory*, 4.

⁵⁰ Failure, scholars like Ros Murray have pointed out, is central to Artaud’s work; he needed all his work to fail in some way to be able to prove that representation and language were the route to failure (c.f., Murray 2014).

⁵¹ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 24.

with Artaud the focus on the expression of bodily experience and the deconstruction of language in their texts, Badac still present works with a legible and often chronological representational frame, organised stories using discernible human characters. Badac's theatre-work still demands the conditions of the theatre that Artaud sought to deliquesce. I approach this paradox through the fastidious Jerzy Grotowski, Lambert's other pole star. As Grotowski's essay, 'He Wasn't Entirely Himself' reveals, he is exasperated by Artaud's haphazard textual assemblage. But Grotowski's central critique targets Artaud's idea the theatre would offer 'purification' through violence and cruelty, and that playing out those phenomena on stage would keep their power within the protective walls of the theatre.⁵² Whereas Badac-after-Artaud, cite violence as a necessary and animating theatrical mode and method, Grotowski's contrapuntal stance is theatre cannot direct nor deplete 'dark powers', and, is at best, ambivalent towards our protection; 'I don't believe', Grotowski writes, 'the explosive portrayal of Sodom and Gomorrah on a stage calms or sublimates in any way the sinful impulses for which those two towns were punished'.⁵³ Lambert's belief in exploring human rights issues by replaying and restaging acts of violence – unstintingly revealing the sinful impulses of Sodom – faces Grotowskian counterargument that the theatre has limited capacity to lance the boil of the feelings and sensations permitting and cultivating such abuses. Instead, as this thesis argues, whilst the aesthetic languages of the theatre can offer a protective architecture within which to comprehend and come to consciousness of the 'dark powers' human rights violations, it is in the modes of work and action outside of the performance event where social change will happen. Activism therefore rejects *catharsis* in the theatre.

⁵² Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 124.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Steve Lambert is an intense performer. A fist of energy, each muscle vibrating, veins knocking out of his neck like ropes, shoulders lined up like an iron bar, his voice barking like a big dog, eyeballing the audience fearlessly, sometimes confrontationally, as he stalks the perimeters of the stage. These are the trademark characteristics of his performance style, privileging physical mastery, fitness, endurance, strength. Lambert cultivates the body he believes is necessary to serve the extremities, brutality, and deprivations of human rights stories; the body to make Badac theatre. His somatic regimes, rehearsal methodology and performance style that uncouples physical endeavour from realist mimetic representation owe a debt to the writings and followers of Grotowski. Grotowski's texts are peppered with the Polish word 'badać', meaning 'to examine' or 'research'. Grotowski's active process of research conducted through the 'body-being' of the performer was a practical realisation of theoretical and abstract discussions of one of theatre's main preoccupations: embodied practice as a way of knowing. For Lambert, too, research is a cornerstone of his theatre practice, 'every one of our projects, every one, bar none, has been researched to the hilt'⁵⁴. 'Badać' is a key underlying proposition for Grotowski's lifelong research on the prospect of discovering the self, with, and through, the other.⁵⁵ Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas' contribution to the discussion of embodied understandings of human rights; where the face-to-face encounter with the other gives rise to instinctive responsibility, our 'felt duty' to one another, working through the intersubjective realm, so we might return to ourselves with that new mode of knowing.⁵⁶ I consequently draw upon Levinas' thought in *Totality and Infinity* to examine modes of performance seeking to externalise and physicalise interiority, and the

⁵⁴ Lambert is passionate about the origin and authenticity of his research, he told me in interview, 'Every project we've ever done has been created with the involvement of victims or survivors of that subject matter, or with, and with groups of people who work with those people as well on a daily basis [...] The work has been created, in a specific way because it gives people who are suffering or in those situations a voice. All I am is a conduit really'. See: Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2010.

⁵⁵ Dominika Laster, *Grotowski's Bridge Made of Memory: Embodied Memory, Witnessing and Transmission in The Grotowski Work* (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2016), 5.

⁵⁶ Jean-Michel Salanskis, *Levinas Vivant* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006), 63.

connecting potential for Grotowski's influence upon Badac Theatre. 'The other's facial expression or bodily posture affects me before I begin to reflect on it' writes Levinas; 'it is dual: a command and a summons. Naked and defenseless, the face and the body signifies, with or without words, "Do not kill me"'.⁵⁷ This is the very animation of human rights theatre, that we return, recognised in each other, renewed in responsibilities to preserve life.

Grotowski developed a system of actor training, physically demanding exercises, necessitating complete concentration and commitment. For Grotowski this rigorous somatic is in service of an intricate psychophysical acting approach seeking not to give the actor 'a bag of tricks', but so they can offer themselves as a 'total gift'.⁵⁸ Lambert often cites lineage to Grotowski in his work, but Lambert's priority is the expression of bodily discipline, of physical prowess performed, to 'repeat and repeat' until the 'will' is diminished.⁵⁹ There is perhaps greater affiliation in Badac's practice with the military bootcamp than with Grotowski's wishes to create a finely tuned response mechanism in the actor, and to facilitate a transcendental state that will, 'cross our frontiers, exceed our limitations, fill our emptiness - fulfil ourselves'.⁶⁰ Across Badac's work, even when about bodies wounded, or vulnerability formed through extremis, there is fetishisation of hyper-masculine corporeal power. In earlier iterations of their theatrical mission, Badac state their actors will be led 'to a point of physical destruction, where they have no more to give, from this exhaustion, this freedom, they will explore their violence, they will pull from themselves their capacity for destruction and channel this into the play'.⁶¹ For Lambert, at the very bottom of exhaustion

⁵⁷ Salanskis, *Levinas Vivant*, 137.

⁵⁸ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 16.

⁵⁹ This is drawn from Lambert's articulation of his rehearsal methodology and own approach to performance, 'I get them to repeat and repeat, we repeat it over and over. And the actors go mental. They literally lose the will to live. But that's just how I work'. See: Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2020.

⁶⁰ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 21.

⁶¹ Badac Theatre, 'About Us.'

lies a discovery of the roots of violence and properties of destruction, creating embodied knowledge to serve the stories the company perform. Grotowski also believed in exhaustion of the actors as a pathway to release and submission,⁶² and the ‘principles’ of his Laboratory were demanding and monastic, the performer indivisible from their work on the creative act.⁶³ However, in Grotowski’s wish to train the actor as an ‘organism-channel’, and not an athletic, muscle-bound ‘organism-mass’, his desire for physical rigour is in preparation for subtle, transcendent meetings.⁶⁴ In a synopsis that might reproach the mis-en-scène of Badac, Grotowski pronounced, ‘I also have no interest in physical theatre. Because what is it anyway? Acrobatics onstage? Screaming? Wallowing on the floor? Violence?’⁶⁵ For him these were ‘false visions of the human existence’.⁶⁶ Given the adjacency between depiction of instances of torture and punishment within Badac’s theatre, and the role of physical suffering in rehearsals and performance, I read the work of Lambert as using punitive modes to achieve ‘absolution’ for the performer as proxy victims of human rights crimes.⁶⁷ As I explore further below, the audience, then, are responsabilised to play mute bystander, admonished in their own horror for letting this re-performed violation play out once more. There is an ethico-ideology of the cleansing power of suffering in Badac’s work, but punishing the performing body as *absolution* presents a stunted catharsis in human rights theatre, creating ethical-gapping in allowing the assembled to believe justice has been served, or that an audience can pay penance for violations by suffering within the representation.

⁶² To diminish any hagiography of Grotowski, actors such as Zbigniew Cynkutis were left physically and psychologically shattered by the work.

⁶³ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 258.

⁶⁴ Jerzy Grotowski and Kris Salata, ‘Reply to Stanislavsky,’ *The Drama Review* (MIT Press) 52, no. 2 (2008): 37.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

⁶⁶ Grotowski was critical of the masochistic bastardisation of his actor training system into an exercise regimen, cautioning this could mask personal sincerity, ‘One can torture oneself for years and years... One can treat the exercises as an absolution for the fact that in doing we do not go all the way’. See: Grotowski and Salata, ‘Reply to Stanislavsky,’ 38.

⁶⁷ In discussions of his work Lambert has cited Elie Wiesel’s oft quoted ‘What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander’, from an interview with Carol Rittner and Sandra Meyers in *Courage To Care - Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust*, (New York: NYU Press, 1986) 2.

Grotowski developed his work towards a more studied moral mission, where to attempt the encounter of the other through the self is to engender ‘the total acceptance of one human being by another’.⁶⁸ I read this as aligning with the ethical precepts of the human rights movement; in locating comparable humanity in each other, we become conscious of their frailties and needs, and are morally bound to their fate. Grotowski expounded the virtue of ‘awareness’ as a route to consciousness, not found through language, but new insights felt through the transmissive *sentient* qualities of the placed and relational body. In lionising the virtuosic and physical grit of Grotowski’s practice, the values of corporeal imperfection are demoted, denying the hope of ‘illumination’ and ‘personal transmutation’,⁶⁹ the *sentient* qualities which allow consciousness of the scope and significance of human rights. For Badac, it is darker forces, ‘disturbing, brutal and destructive’ that govern the experience of political exploration for both actors and audience.⁷⁰ ‘This is what they want’ the manifesto coolly states as if an act of artistic hypnosis, ‘If they are to understand both the capabilities and suffering of man then they must expect the experience to be painful’.⁷¹

Building bridges

In our interview, Lambert referred to the work of Grotowski as being central to his company’s configuration of the actor-audience relationship. The staging and mis-en-scène of

⁶⁸ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 25.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Badac Theatre, ‘About Us’

I am also interested here in Lambert’s reports that the collaboration with the Palestinian Theatre company Al Harah for the play *Al Nakba* ‘didn’t quite go as well as it should have done’. He offered that the company were unprepared for the Badac style of working, that they were too mainstream, and that there was a concern amongst the actors about appear ‘vulnerable’. ‘Palestinians are quite reluctant to show any vulnerability, they are quite protective about showing vulnerability’ Lambert offered as explanation, ‘the idea of the play was that we showed people the suffering of the Palestinians under the bombing in Gaza. So there needed to be vulnerability and not just resistance, so, there was a conflict there right away’. See: Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert.

⁷¹ Badac Theatre, ‘About Us’

Badac's work can be seen as having genealogical link to the architectural 'spatial solutions' of Theatre Laboratory designer Jerzy Gurawski,⁷² philosophising two performing ensembles, the acting company, and the spectators. Eugenio Barba's impressionistic mappings of Grotowski's performance action in his essay 'Actor Training', show intricately threaded patterns of movement, musical scores of physicality, battle-plans criss-crossed with arrows,⁷³ demonstrating Grotowski's belief 'performance results from an integration of these two "ensembles"'.⁷⁴ In the production *Kordian* (1962), the spectators were situated as if in a mental asylum, sitting on bunk beds with actors in straightjackets as fellow inmates, an early manifestation of 'environmental theatre', the audience ensemble becoming 'signs' within the production.⁷⁵ Here the audience are matrixed, given a role, but are conceived as wordless watchers, not asked to 'participate' in ways I examine later in this chapter. In the work of Badac, as with the productions at Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory, the audience shares the same space as the actors, standing around the edges, lining the walls of the corridors, or moving through the space at the behest of the performers. Lambert is looking to generate heightened audience *sentient* engagement, not just through proximity and the removal of formal stage barriers, but also through the audience experiencing some of the same conditions as the actors. This effort is intended to make them partakers in a joint endeavour,

⁷² Jerzy Gurawski worked primarily as an architect but was Grotowski's primary stage designer. Gurawski designed the sets for *Shakantulā*, *Dziady*, *Kordian*, *Akropolis*, *Dr Faustus* and *The Constant Prince*. He was interested in 'the ideal theatre', one based on the principle of drawing spectators into the action by changing the relations between the audience and the stage. His transformed thinking about the set as an 'image', instead treating space as a dynamic environment for facilitating changing relations.

⁷³ Eugenio Barba was the Italian director, and the founder and leader of influential Danish company, Odin Teatret. He became one of Grotowski's closest collaborators, including as his official assistant director (a role he performed during work on *Akropolis* and *Dr Faustus*). Barba became an untiring promoter of Grotowski in the West and was the editor and publisher of *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968).

⁷⁴ Eugenio Barba, 'Actor's Training (1959-1962),' in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Jerzy Grotowski (New York: Routledge, 2002), 157.

⁷⁵ Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater* (New York: Applause, 1994), 27. In *Dr Faustus* (1963) the spectators and the actors co-constituted the invited guests to Faustus' last banquet, all positioned around the long T-shaped table where the magician would be forced to relive his hellwards journey.

as a performing ensemble in their own right, who have a concomitant corporeal responsibility: -

If we've asked you to stand up, it's because we want you to be physically involved in the piece. As soon as you sit down, you're in a position where you're comfortable. I want people to be in a place where they can react physically, where you can allow the piece to overwhelm you. You can't stand up when you have seen on the stage what other people have to go through? Really?⁷⁶

Grotowski concluded it was impossible to facilitate the desired communion between actor and spectator within the frame of conventional theatre modes, feeling his previous production experiments did little to 'bridge the division between actors and spectators' whilst the performance was contextualised in a framework of organised representation.⁷⁷ In one of his last texts, 'Performer', Grotowski is still searching for the method to establish a more profound and interactive connection between actors and audiences, to find a place where the 'witness' is intensely moved by the 'presence' of the performer. The actor, Grotowski writes, is 'a bridge between the witness and this something. In this sense, *Performer* is *pontifex*, maker of bridges'.⁷⁸ Lambert also adopts the terminology of the bridge to articulate his theatre practice, and how his mode of performance aims to communicate messages and ideas from within the subjective realm of sensation and affect. 'Theatre is the bridge that links what we think we know with another's experience', Lambert asserts.⁷⁹ Rather than seeing theatre as observational apparatus, as testimonial theatre might, where the panes of the window can be ethereally thin, but remain intact, Badac's practices re-constellate theatre as a tool for the eradication of physical borders between the performers and the audience, and of the borders

⁷⁶ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

⁷⁷ Lisa Welford, 'General Introduction: Ariadne's Thread,' in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Welford (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), 9.

⁷⁸ Jerzy Grotowski, 'Performer,' in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Welford (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), 377.

Grotowski's polyvocality reaches towards the papal charge of bridging the world of the sacred, with the world of man, whereas Lambert's conceptualisation of the term is a more secularised version.

⁷⁹ Lambert, *Progetto Crossing Path*.

of bodily autonomy itself. Lambert says, '[i]f it is grounded in truth and honesty, then everything is allowed. There are no barriers'.⁸⁰ Usually, in human rights discourse the removal of borders and barriers is something to commend; but here I highlight an ethical dilemma, where Lambert's sense of artistic permission, is in tension with a lack of meaningful consent. In using *The Factory* as a case-study, I explore what it means for theatre-makers to immerse audiences within human rights disasters, to bring the worlds of atrocity up around the spectators, and the impact of arriving at consciousness.

Horrors of the Holocaust: *The Factory*

Lambert cites Grotowski's adaptation of Stanisław Wyspiański's *Akropolis* as having direct impact on his work. In Grotowski's version the action is relocated from the stately Wawel Cathedral in Kraków, to Auschwitz. This production was in 1962, just 17 years after the extermination camp had closed. Lambert acknowledges *Akropolis* as providing the theatrical framework for the Badac play, *The Factory* (2008), 'obviously he put them in a barracks, I put them getting off the train into the gas chamber', Lambert qualified.⁸¹ Theatre Laboratory dramaturg Ludwik Flazen notes, even though the audience were cast as witnesses, told at the opening of play 'you are the living and we are the dead', there was never intention to make 'direct contact between actors and spectators'.⁸² The actors also exist outside the structural frames of the play, and while close to the spectators, they look through them as if they were not there. Here Grotowski uses proximity to amplify detachment and create cognitive dissonance, so that 'physical closeness translates into psychological distance'.⁸³ Lambert's

⁸⁰ Lambert, *Progetto Crossing Path*.

⁸¹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

⁸² Ludwik Flazen, 'Wyspiański's Akropolis,' in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), 65.

⁸³ Magda Romanska, 'Between History and Memory: Auschwitz in Akropolis, Akropolis in Auschwitz,' *Theatre Survey* (American Society for Theatre Research) 50, no. 2 (2009): 223-250.

strategy is the direct opposite. In *The Factory* the audience are cast as inmates of the camp, companion prisoners, implicated witnesses and fellow sufferers in an event that attempts to collapse distance, ‘This is why. Why you must survive. To bear witness. Witness to our murder’ the character of The Man repeatedly insists.⁸⁴ The events are not historicised but played out as if ‘happening’ around us. Through this immersion and intimacy, we are asked to be in the same headspace, to share the prisoner’s felt-understanding of the situation. There are no barriers. *The Factory* opens with the following stage direction:

[TWO OF THE MEN NOW REAPPEAR FROM INSIDE THE BUILDING. THEY ARE NOW GUARDS. THEY ARE CARRYING METAL BATS AND BEGIN TO SCREAM AT THE AUDIENCE]

GUARDS: MOVE. MOVE. FUCKING MOVE
 IN THE BUILDING. IN THE FUCKING BUILDING. IN THE FUCKING
 BUILDING
 FUCKING MOVE. FUCKING MOVE. FUCKING MOVE.⁸⁵

Repeatedly told to ‘Fucking line up’ by the guards, the audience are making their way to Auschwitz. In lining up for ‘transportation’, the ‘what if?’ game of theatre is now played with physical intimidation and violence. This is not the decadence of free-roaming immersive theatre forms; we are not Rancière’s ‘emancipated spectator’, at best we are bewildered adherents. Singling out individual audience members, the actors playing the guards swing iron bats close to the spectators’ heads, before using them to beat metal sheets. The sounds punch all the way up to the amygdala. The violence is simultaneously performed and real. Painfully proximate to the Holocaust, Grotowski felt the deficiencies of representation and that literal recreation was problematic; ‘[w]e cannot play prisoner, we cannot create such images in theatre’, he exclaimed, removing all guards and SS men from *Akropolis*, looking

⁸⁴ Steve Lambert, ‘The Factory,’ unpublished script, 2008, 35.

⁸⁵ Lambert, *The Factory*, 4.

instead to create Auschwitz as a world which is innately internal to each of us.⁸⁶ With costumes that represented holes torn into flesh, ‘gas chambers’ evoked by a junkyard of props, the play expresses the inmates’ stubborn will to live’ and, amidst the reverberating horror and bitter desolation, ‘the right to vegetate and to love goes on at its everyday pace’.⁸⁷ There is, by contrast, an unwavering tone of terror and bleakness portrayed in Badac’s *The Factory*. There is defiance from the prisoners in Lambert’s play, there is muttered anger too, but he refuses to draw in the chiaroscuro of humanity recovered, of playful imagination poking up through the earth found in *Akropolis*.⁸⁸ Grotowski wanted his production to offer the spectator a choice, they must decide if the piece is about death, or about resurrection; they must decide if at the end of the journey, there is hope. Here I connect to the practice of hope located in the formation of the human rights project. ‘That’s just not my job,’ Lambert rejoinders when I ask him about the location of hope and redemption in his work, ‘you know, if I’m tackling things then it’s about staring that truth in the face. It’s not about offering hope. I see that as a massive cop out. I don’t want them going out the theatre with a feeling that it’s all okay’.⁸⁹ The end of *The Factory* has the audience filtering out of the underground space as lifeless body after body is dragged away.⁹⁰ The audience are left with the ‘truth’ of Lambert’s representation of the extermination camps – are left with the ‘truth’ of what it means for an actor to move another body to another room. Perhaps, even left with the ‘truth’ made in the shared reverberations of being told a story that nudges into collective histories of genocides, staring into the faces of ‘the other’ audience members, faces that, Levinas tells us,

⁸⁶ Richard Schechner and Theodore Hoffman, ‘Interview with Grotowski,’ in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), 51.

⁸⁷ Flaszyn, ‘Wyspianski’s Akropolis,’ in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, 66.

⁸⁸ Margaret Croyden and Jerzy Grotowski, “I Said Yes to the Past’: Interview with Grotowski,” in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), 84.

⁸⁹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

⁹⁰ The close of *Ashes to Ashes* is similarly bleak with the protagonist and sole survivor declaring, ‘At that moment. I realised that my life was meaningless. At that moment. I realised my life was over’. See: Lambert and Robb, *Ashes to Ashes*, 37. Or *The Flood* which concludes ‘Just pain. Unbearable pain. I love him. I love him. So much. But destroyed. Everything destroyed. The insanity. The insanity.’ See: Lambert, *The Flood*, 24.

say 'do not kill me'. Grotowski rejected asking spectators to be *as if* living witnesses in his poetic paraphrase of the concentration camp, but for Lambert, there is an ethical persistence in looking for a theatre that will conscientise the audience to 'never again'.

Shock and Sensation

Watching *The Factory* in Edinburgh, 2008, brought BBC Scotland Reporter, Angie Brown, to tears. She informed readers she managed to endure 12 minutes of the performance before finding an exit door, revealed only when another member of the audience bolted. In her review, Brown notes the collapse of the usual separation between actors and audience provided her with no 'safety zone'.⁹¹ Furthermore, the deliberate blurring of territories meant she could no longer intellectually separate the behaviours of the character and the actor. Brown recounts, 'I was rooted to the spot and I remember trying hard not to flinch, or even breathe, in case my movement caught their attention'.⁹² She recalls she could not even speak to Lambert on the phone the following day, 'because I felt, irrationally, absolutely terrified of him'.⁹³ Brown had become afraid because the framing of the event had distorted the divisions between actor and action, between performer and character. Lambert's actions were matrixed within a dramaturgy, but one where the framework was deliberately rubbed away, made to feel 'insensible'. Dominic Cavendish wrote in *The Telegraph* that Badac had created 'something akin to a Holocaust theme-park'.⁹⁴ Brown was not the only audience member

⁹¹ Angie Brown, 'Fringe Show Felt Like Torture,' 15 August, 2008, accessed January 01, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/edinburgh_and_east/7563083.stm.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Dominic Cavendish, 'Dominic Cavendish reviews *The Factory*, *Caravan*, *The Boy from Centreville* at the Pleasance Courtyard,' *The Telegraph*, 12 August, 2008.

Cavendish continued, 'There's no subtlety here, just one sledgehammer tactic after another [...] Then lights out - the punishment is over. We're moved, of course, but that's our imagination at work, not their intervention' (Cavendish, *The Factory*, 2008).

who had a strong physical response to the work, with one viewer's refusal to 'fucking move' resulting in a physical clash outside of the theatre and Lambert being spoken to by the police. His conflict with journalist Ian Shuttleworth, and theatre director, Chris Wilkinson, was the talk of the Edinburgh Festival that year:⁹⁵ it generated yards of industry commentary and became a flashpoint stalking Badac's reputation ever since. For Lambert, this was a deliberate and pre-planned attempt to disrupt the performance by intentionally breaking the frame, a spectator sporting with the artifice of the encounter to retake power, to sabotage the work of the performers to create a sensational story. For Shuttleworth, however, his vocalised response of 'say please' to the actors playing the camp guards was an ethical stance to feeling intimidated:

These actors were not *pretending* to bellow at us: they *were* bellowing at us. They were not *pretending* to deafen us by prolonged metal-beating sessions in a confined, stone-walled space: to be sure, this was a symbol of physical beatings given, but the reality is that they *were* deafening us. Overall, they were not *pretending*, as the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz, to bully us: they, as actors, *were* bullying us.⁹⁶

Shuttleworth identified the lesson of the play as challenging illegitimately claimed authority, and of ways to use his body to stand in the way of (enacted) human rights abuses. Entangled with these ethical concerns, the concern that caused Shuttleworth to file his first 'no star' review, was the play displaying 'a complete misunderstanding of the status of the audience'.⁹⁷ Working within the genre of immersive theatre, Shuttleworth writes, the company should have hypothesised defiance from the audience. Furthermore, given the actor-spectator relationships engineered by the play, Badac were deficient for not anticipating ways to bring a range of responses into the work; a verbal protest should not be read as a disruption, but as a comprehensible consequence of bringing spectators to *sentience* of the

⁹⁵ Now working as Chris Haydon, who went on to become Artistic Director of the Rose Theatre, Kingston.

⁹⁶ Ian Shuttleworth, 'PROMPT CORNER 15/2008: The Factory,' August 15, 2008, accessed January 05, 2010, <http://www.cix.co.uk/~shutters/reviews/08144.htm>

⁹⁷ Ibid.

impacts of violence and brutality. Instead, Shuttleworth complained the performance became 'a complacently abusive system which took no account of others as autonomous beings' and was 'exhibiting the same thoughtlessness and contempt' as the camp guards.⁹⁸ Theatre critic, Brian Logan, further claimed the piece 'alienated' those who might have 'chosen' to pay homage to the event/s, 'the company's thuggish bid to be as unpleasant as Auschwitz just draws attention to the dissimilarities. We have chosen to be here. We are not obliged to take orders. We can leave'.⁹⁹ Wilkinson raised similar concerns in his theatre blog for *The Guardian*, writing that the performers' impotence in the face of resistance to cooperate revealed the dramatic and political inertia of the piece. In his experience of the play, the heightened physical frenzy of the performance could not conceal a failure to conceptualise and strategise for conscientisation and activation in the audience. For Wilkinson, failing to imagine an audience who might be politically or morally motivated, brought to consciousness through a *sentient* response, flagged up the relative security of a unidirectional game of pretend. The unresponsive mimetic action and representational frame inconsonantly exposed that, 'we are not victims. The harder the show works at trying to convince us otherwise, the more we are reminded that we are in no real danger'.¹⁰⁰

The irony of being subsequently threatened outside of the show for purportedly blowing kisses at the actors playing the camp guards was not lost on Wilkinson, who posited that Badac's interest in violence 'seems to extend beyond fiction and into real life'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Shuttleworth, 'PROMPT CORNER 15/2008: The Factory,' 2008.

⁹⁹ Brian Logan, 'Edinburgh festival: The Factory,' *The Guardian*, August 20, 2008, accessed January 01, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Chris Wilkinson, 'Edinburgh festival: How to shock and how not to shock,' *The Guardian*, August 11, 2008, accessed January 05, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/theatreblog/2008/aug/11/howshocking>

¹⁰¹ Chris Wilkinson, 'Edinburgh festival: Holocaust show's theatre of violence spills offstage,' *The Guardian*, August 22, 2008, accessed January 05, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/theatreblog/2008/aug/11/howshocking>.

Wilkinson recorded in his blog in *The Guardian*, that 'Two days later, Lambert barged into me in the street. After trying unsuccessfully to explain to him why I did what I did, he shouted in my face: "I will fuck you up. I will fuck you up. In Edinburgh or London, I will fuck you up. Are you fucking scared now?" Well, yes I was,

Theatre critic, Lyn Gardner, noted in relation to *The Factory*, ‘Why should theatregoers pay to be treated badly – particularly when being treated badly tends to make them behave badly, too?’.¹⁰² I emphasise the pathologies of a physically and psychically confrontational mis-en-scène that paradoxically induce small acts of irreverent rebellion intending to challenge the claimed moral superiority of the frame. For most reviewers there was little continuity or contiguity between the experience of Auschwitz and the experience of *The Factory*. Goode criticised the ‘entirely delusional "empathy"’ that was ‘activated through a constructed onslaught that exists in a basically dishonest relationship with its own artifice and metaphoricity’.¹⁰³ Badac’s interplay of the actual and metaphoric was asymmetrical; the actual was overwhelmingly and misdirectingly valorised, engendering dramatic and political fissure. In using its sensational supremacy to evade the audience’s faculties for critical distinctions between different kinds of representation, “look how real this experience is!”, becomes our take-home reward for having tolerated our own (relatively trivial) abusive relationship with the makers of the work’.¹⁰⁴ Badac’s play had split the crowd; those who felt the performance of violence reverberated turbulently on their phrenic bodies, and those who could not tolerate the reason-gap of being made to pretend they were in Auschwitz. *The Factory* was a *sensationalised* piece of work. I argue the (mis)handling of the panes between fictionalised real event and the ‘real life’ human actions engendered by the script contributed to the ethical stresses both within and without the work and narrowed the route to consciousness. I now step-inside the dramaturgy of Lambert’s plays to analyse the æffect of

and so I ended up having to go to the police, who gave him a formal warning’. See: Wilkinson, ‘Edinburgh Festival’, 2010.

¹⁰² Lyn Gardner, ‘Edinburgh festival 2014: why run from zombies when you can ceilidh the night away?’ *The Guardian*, August 6, 2014, accessed January 05, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/aug/06/edinburgh-festival-2014-audiences-behaviing-badly-gardner>

¹⁰³ Chris Goode, ‘Edinburgh diary 2010: #7,’ August 22, 2010, accessed January 05, 2020.

<http://beescope.blogspot.com/2010/08/edinburgh-diary-2010-7.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

the text as a constituent of his human rights theatre, before moving to a closing exploration of the animation of the audience.

Vocabularies of Violence

Whereas the logic of word-after-word in testimony theatre, oriented towards recounting and reportage, insists we apply chronology, the script of *The Factory* rejects the automatic transmission of insight through personal stories made into legible narratives. Instead, these scripts attempt to perform the disrupting and defeating logic of the extermination camps through fragmented speech, aborted ideas, and endless echolalic repetitions.¹⁰⁵ The character of THE WOMAN wheels around the same mantras as she drags herself back and forth across the space, persisting in her language as she persists in her will to survive:

WOMAN:

Must survive. Must survive. Must survive

Concentrate. Concentrate

Don't look at them. Don't look at them. Don't look at them

Must survive. Must survive. Must survive. Must survive. Must survive.¹⁰⁶

I am interested that Brown, in watching the play, began to internalise this character's monologue, concentrating to stay with the story, not wanting to catch the guard's 'attention'. The linguistic action of the play began to perform itself on the body of the audience. "The camp guards aimed to disarm and disorientate, and take away people's right to ask questions," says Lambert, "What you're left with are bullets of language".¹⁰⁷ But in the world of *The*

¹⁰⁵ He describes the process of playwriting as one he had to adopt to make the kind of work he wanted to act in, 'I don't really see myself as being a writer', he says batting the discussion away as fruitless exploration, 'everything I write, I am acting it out in my head as I write. I don't know much about how any 'poetry' comes about' See: Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Lambert, *The Factory*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Laura Barnett, 'Some people leave, some people cry,' *The Guardian*, August 5, 2008, accessed January 01, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/aug/05/edinburghfestival.theatre2>

Factory, it is not simply the prisoners who have their language curtailed. The play also shows those who held ‘power’ as faltering and incoherent, within an incomprehensible and inexpressible system. The below speech is designed to complexify the audience’s view of the ‘willing executioners’ who have persistently barked in their faces, who have hitherto used the face-to-face moment as an eschatological encounter to install the fear that man is capable of killing another man:

THE GUARD

The children. The children. Take them to the gas. Take them to the gas. They will die quickly. If you take them to the gas. They will die quickly. If not. If not. They will get hurt. Hurt. Trampled. Beaten. Is better for them. Near the gas. Is better for them. Is difficult. But is better for them. Near the gas. They will die quickly.¹⁰⁸

THE GUARD is within a moment of extremis, risking personal safety to express a heinous but humane concept towards a group of people he has been conditioned to see as less than human, as alien to holding rights. The urgency, the insistency, the paradox is communicated in the staccato repetitions, words returning and butting up against a central idea of hastening infant death that refuses to morally coalesce.¹⁰⁹ The texts bear close relation to Lambert’s drafting process, where he lets the words and phrases that recur from his research period swim up to the surface to be netted into the text.¹¹⁰ *The Journey* (2018) is more explicitly scripted around interview-based testimony. Lambert contends his visit to a refugee camp in Lebanon certifies his knowledge of the reality of the Syrian Civil War and accompanying

¹⁰⁸ Lambert, *The Factory*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ This strategy of repetition finds its apotheosis in Lambert’s play about the First World War, *The Flood*, where these bullets of language stand in for the traumatic arrest of shellshock: The Solider: ‘Forward. Forward. The wire. Make the wire. Make the wire (Shell) Drop. Drop. Injuries. Injuries. Everywhere injuries. Everywhere injuries. Don’t look. Don’t look. Don’t look. Concentrate. Concentrate. The wire. The wire. Make the wire. Move. Move. Move. Forward. Forward’. See: Lambert, *The Flood*.

¹¹⁰ Nor does Lambert see his scripts as a fixed entity; a draft script is brought to rehearsals and then is edited as the actors rehearse with the material, and though he is protective of having ownership of the work (‘the intensity of that final product, that’s mine’. See: Lambert, *Progetto Crossing Path*), he acknowledges that with the focus on physical action and audience interaction, amendments will occur over the extended runs of the plays, ‘the actors find the flow. So, by the end of it, you tend to find that the final script that we are using, I have to ask the actors what it is, and they have to send me a copy’ (Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2020).

refugee crisis for *The Journey* – ‘when we work with refugees, we *work* with refugees’.¹¹¹

Critique of verbatim practices examined in the previous chapter were concerned with fidelity, editing, recontextualisation, but in Lambert’s work testimony speeches are purposefully ripped up, punctuated, looped like sampled music:

Boy: Nothing in. Nothing out. No food. No supplies. Nothing. Then bombed. They were bombed. Civilians. Bombed. Starved and bombed. Civilians. By their own authorities. Starved and bombed.¹¹²

Here are the bones of a recounted story, but one carved up with striking punctuation to accentuate and underscore Badac’s interest in performing repetition to highlight replicating patterns of perpetration. I am interested in the way Lambert’s style of theatre and approach to performance fosters a particular dramaturgy and methodology of editing testimony. *The Journey* is a highly-strung libretto of the most shocking and brutal behaviours. There are circling images of children castrated, families mutilated, repeated rapes, piles of cleaved flesh, of torture breaking the body. Moments of inhumanity spectacularised by clamorous and unrelenting language. One character in the play concluding her scene with direct address; ‘Remember that. When you write. I have seen it’.¹¹³ This inclusion emphasises the presence of the interviewer and therefore accentuates claims to authenticity, but also stretches the world of the play to pass to the audience their ethical obligation to the ‘other’. For Lambert a way to cement that responsibility was to bring onstage ‘a guest refugee’, stepping into Scene 11 of *The Journey* to perform text – ‘I cross a line. A border. One step. Am a refugee. To you’.¹¹⁴ Alston reflects that ‘the very notion of staging reality in immersive theatre tends, more often than not, to be avoided by immersive theatre makers who strive to achieve ever-

¹¹¹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

¹¹² Steve Lambert, ‘The Journey,’ unpublished script, 2018, 14.

¹¹³ Lambert, *The Journey*, 26.

¹¹⁴ Lambert, *The Journey*, 61.

more total closure of a fictive cosmos'.¹¹⁵ Yet, human rights theatre must irrupt with the real, must persuade the audience to make connection with a real-world event. An audience member leaving the production may momentarily disrupt the fictive cosmos, the remaining bodies exist as evidence that it necessitates an exceptional mode of witnessing, and by extension as something requiring exceptional witnesses. There is tension here in disrupting this fictive world by bringing on a 'real' but performing refugee, to recite the pre-scripted lines 'Wrong. Am not a danger. Not me. Not my family. Not my people. Not a danger'.¹¹⁶ This exogenous arrival has the potential to puncture the mis-en-scène in the explanatory gap between the trained (Caucasian) actors beseeching spectators to understand what they have 'seen',¹¹⁷ and the presence of a refugee, on whose body is inferred direct experience.

Fear Factors

Lambert is unabashed when I ask him if he feels the accusations of violence and poor ethics surrounding *The Factory* compromised the human rights 'credentials' of the company. Instead, Lambert is resolute in asserting that the form and staging of the piece was the 'closest we've come to what I think our theatre should be like'.¹¹⁸ Lambert believed it was this play that made him *pontifex*, allowing him to find the bridge to the audience¹¹⁹. Indeed,

¹¹⁵ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, 61.

¹¹⁶ Lambert, *The Box*, 62

I also contend this is ethically problematic in terms of generic substitution, asking this 'guest' to parrot lines that are literally reductive, and infantilising in denoting language skills.

¹¹⁷ Lambert has no interest in questions of appropriation and the ethics of ventriloquism in human rights theatre, 'I just don't get involved in those conversations' he affirms, 'those are conversations people who don't live in my world have' (Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert, 2010). These are ambagious discussions that Lambert sees as a distraction from the political mission of his work; the politics of power threaded through these analyses of ownership and positionality must be dismissed if meaningful human rights work is to be foregrounded.

¹¹⁸ David Laing, 'Vivid Holocaust Journey,' *The List*, August 21, 2008, accessed January 01, 2010, <https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/12206-the-factory/>

¹¹⁹ For Lambert it was also the wider cumulation of response that was important, highlighting audience members with family connections to the Holocaust who were deeply upset by the 'disrespect' that Shuttleworth and Wilkinson had showed.

there were reviewers who praised *The Factory*, with *The Scotsman* commending the play for examining ‘the very borderline of death and survival’, whilst speaking ‘straight to the heart’,¹²⁰ and David Laing of *The List* praising ‘an intensity rarely achieved theatrically’.¹²¹ ‘Two shows a day, sold out’, Lambert stressed, ‘all done by word of mouth. You don’t get that by making a bad piece of theatre’.¹²² Thinking of the multi-layered publicity factors that drive box-office sales, I concur with Lambert’s assertion that watchers of Badac’s work know the stripe of theatre they are going to get. The company cannot be accused of hiding their provocative style. Badac go some way to actively promote a bad-boy reputation, their hyper-masculine work recreating something of Steven Berkoff’s muscle-theatre. The company energetically market their work with copy including *The List*’s review that *The Flood* is ‘a chance for the strong of stomach to bear witness to the monstrosities of a war’.¹²³ For Lambert this forthright and blunt description of their work is an ethical position, he is giving the audience a choice about whether they have the ‘stomach’ to step into his worlds.

Badac are interested in an audience that is actively willing to place themselves at some vulnerability to seek an *affective* response. ‘The point of our work’, Lambert insists, ‘is to shake people up a little’,¹²⁴ and those who attend are pursuing that biopolitical reverberation. However, I argue here that the ethical dimension to this work is not limited to agency over attendance, but rather also spans out into two further spheres. Firstly, given the claimed mission of the company, how the performances of Badac add to the bank of images and wider understanding of the human rights atrocity event. The wire connecting the

¹²⁰ The Scotsman, ‘Theatre reviews: The Factory | The Tailor of Inverness,’ August 5, 2008, accessed January 01, 2010, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/theatre-reviews-factory-tailor-inverness-2477986>

¹²¹ Laing, *Vivid Holocaust Journey*.

¹²² Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert.

¹²³ Anna Burnside, ‘The Flood,’ *The List*, August 5, 2014, accessed January 05, 2020, <https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/63325-the-flood/>

¹²⁴ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

production back to the real-world event crackles with tension. Secondly, the problematic promises made in the aesthetic space that atonement can be delivered by a theatrical production. In Badac's work we are asked to consider we are amongst those who died in the extermination camps, made responsible for carrying a message back with us about the 'reality' of that situation as penance. There is no conceivable mental preparation for that impossible event. Indeed, Lambert deploys disorientation and isolation tactics to accentuate dissonance, going so far as to separate audience groups who have come in together. 'The more vulnerable the audience becomes' says Lambert in an almost conspiratorial tone, 'the more you can feel you can influence their opinions'.¹²⁵ I argue there is an underlying belief his work needs our suffering, penitence, and compliance to complete the *mis-en-scène*, that our controlled co-participation will actualise the human rights work of the play:

...the sound and the noise of the first four minutes is colossal, and you just turned around and looked at them and they were completely destroyed, the audience were absolutely destroyed, so the minute you start moving them they are disorientated, you have this really strong effect on how they respond and what they will do.¹²⁶

Lambert's studied position of immunity to other people's responses to his work, is at times allowed to become more complex, '[s]ome people may leave, others may cry,' he affirmed in conversation with Laura Barnett, after her watching of the play *The Factory*; 'but the only thing that matters is that they've felt something'.¹²⁷ His habitude of ambivalence about the experience of the audience, is here tempered by a desire to cultivate the experience of sensation. Affect is prioritised over a socio-ideological understanding, over the *sentience* of melding together with effect, over political consciousness. For Lambert the situation is one of deliberate 'political suspension of the ethical' to alert the audience to catastrophic events

¹²⁵ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Laura Barnett, 'Some people leave, some people cry,' August 5, 2008, accessed January 01, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/aug/05/edinburghfestival.theatre2>

elsewhere.¹²⁸ Affective proximity to the human subject is privileged over the macro-perspective that might lead to consciousness of causal analysis and foster vigilance to preventative action.

Self-preservation and sentience

To gain insight into the ‘reality of a human rights situation’, Badac’s theatre demands a mode of affective participation in the service of, where Lambert’s own sacrificial endeavours to understand barbarity require parity in the commitment of the audience.¹²⁹ This tacit contractual expectation fuels Lambert’s confusion to any rejection of his theatre; the response would be positive ‘if the audience engaged more, worked harder’.¹³⁰ His categorisation of an audience’s ennui is not failure of his dramaturgy or aesthetic, but complacency conditioned by years of watching cozy dross. In Badac’s theatre, it is the audience that completes the aesthetic, and as co-actants in the narrative, the *mis-en-scène* dissipates when spectators are not pulling their weight. ‘It’s not just about actors working, I mean, I’m not performing monkey’, Lambert says incredulously, ‘it’s not just about the audience being voyeurs watching me perform. It’s got to be the audience working as well’.¹³¹ The concept of theatre-as-medicine comes to the fore in Lambert’s human rights theatre. Witnessing must be hyperactivated and drawn out through the penitent body: standing, following, moving on command, enduring. We must not be ‘voyeurs’; watchers holding our sensation within our own bodies. Our *sentient* activation and political consciousness must not be private but

¹²⁸ Tomlin, “A ‘political suspension of the ethical’”, 2010.

¹²⁹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020. There are also some interesting signifiers of the transactive nature of performance that further guides the metier of the company, that the audience should work, but also that the actor is somehow diminished in status if they *perform* for another person. ‘I don’t like the word “performer”’ Lambert grimaces, ‘makes us sound like fucking clowns’ (Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020). His is a more serious intent.

extimate, communicable like a plague and readable by other members of the ensemble(s) within the performance. In neo-puritanical values, the audience must ennoble themselves and atone through work. Grimly, for a company so interested in the Holocaust, work will set us all free. Alston has written extensively on the connection between neo-liberalism and productivity in the ‘work’ of immersive theatre, and how audiences are explicitly and implicitly contracted to complete the vision of the theatre maker.¹³² Here the obligation of co-participation takes on a moral dimension, with Lambert asserting that ‘theatre is not just something you come to for your own gratification – that’s bollocks, get in there and work’.¹³³

The anxiety of being considered ‘a performing monkey’, I argue, is additionally connected to the extreme exposure of his body in pain, self-sacrificed through physical investiture in performance. Lambert spoke in our interview of taking on the psychological and physical reality of the character, allowing the body of the actor to be overwhelmed by the given circumstances. In *Ashes to Ashes* Lambert replays the excruciating ‘knees/chest’ exercise meant to select the weakest for extermination in the camps, in *The Devoured* incanting his monologue whilst continually running, and in *The Cry*, where the ‘performed’ torture made real wounds on his skin. The labours of somatic investigation endowed upon his own body, counts spectators as indebted for vicarious suffering. The theology of this belief displayed in several production images of Lambert standing cruciform, his arms outstretched. *The Cry* put Lambert again in a metal cage where his head was repeatedly plunged into a bucket, and beatings with iron bars so perforating, the performance run had to be cancelled due to repeated injury. ‘THIS IS NOT A MIME’ the stage directions enforce in *Ashes to Ashes*, ‘THEY MUST STRAIN EVERY MUSCLE AND SINEW WHILE PUSHING [...]

¹³² Adam Alston, ‘The Promise of Experience: Immersive Theatre in the Experience Economy,’ in *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, ed. James Frieze (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹³³ Lambert, Interview with Steve Lambert. 2020.

EACH WORK SESSION LASTS UNTIL THE ACTORS ARE ABOUT TO

COLLAPSE'.¹³⁴ It is not the *characters* who are about to collapse, nor are the actors pretending; mimesis will be insufficient service to the human rights atrocity portrayed.

Lambert has made a theatre where he is opened out to be seen in pain. His body is abject and suffering. The debt to him, to any other member of the acting company, to the originary event, is unmeetable by the collected ensemble of the audience. This is the engine of Badac's theatre form, and as Shuttleworth experienced in *The Factory*, there is no desire for us to stop the suffering in the play, the engine wants to sensationalise us to irreconcilable feelings. For Badac, guilt will drive our atonement. The experience-machine becomes the contrition machine. Gardner also expressed this double-bind in her review of *The Cry*: 'Walk away and you are effectively put in the position where you are walking away from all those who are tortured by governments around the world. If you stay, are you being complicit in what is happening on stage, or bearing witness?'.¹³⁵ Just as the spectators are choreographed for *The Box*, Gardner points towards the supra-performance of witnessing activated amongst the audience as the place of ethical concentration. 'With every blow, you can see the audience on the other side flinch; you know that the agony in their eyes is the reflected agony in your own'.¹³⁶ The audience are not witnessing *real* torture; they are witnessing a *simulation* of torture: the collision of the realness of injury to Lambert, and the imposed silence upon the audience degrades the construction of their role as active 'witness'. The status given to suffering is designed to shock to stasis. The intentional conflation of real/simulation makes watchers mute and rejecting full consciousness, as the adrenalin of fear and alert response collide with an emerging cognition that watching is permitting the torture of the actor's body. By attending this production, I escalate violence. As I have demonstrated throughout this

¹³⁴ Lambert, *Ashes to Ashes*. 12

¹³⁵ Gardner, *The Cry*. 2010.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

section, Lambert is explicitly interested in activating sensation, but there are barriers to this as a *sentient* response, where the translation of experience to political consciousness relies on the activation of the audience after the event. Lambert is clear that this is not his responsibility, he has done his work.

Brown was so troubled by her experience of *The Factory* she sought the advice of clinical trauma psychologist, Dr Matthias Schwannauer who informed her that ‘if you flood people with noise and move towards them it increases their physical threat as the brain is subjected to a multi-sensory impact’.¹³⁷ In terms of the efficacy of dramaturgical choices and construction of the *mis-en-scène* in the relaying and replaying of human rights issues, Schwannauer contends extreme sensitisation and proximity means watchers will experience the situation as acute threat. The ‘stickiness’ of hyper-affect closes down the reflective part of the brain, diminishing ability to reason the circumstance is ‘not real’, activating self-preservation and blocking sympathy. ‘The extreme noise causes the brain to feel confused and I know some people who would be tipped over the edge from this show,’ Schwannauer counselled Brown, ‘[y]our reaction has been similar to that of a trauma victim’.¹³⁸ This analysis supports my concluding argument for this section that using immersive theatrical forms, exploiting techniques of proximity to the performed action, actors surging the audience, disorientation through command-controlled configuration, sonic amplification, and displacement through changing locations, will not simply result in bringing the audience ‘closer’ to the human rights atrocity being explored. Rather, that in trying to surround the audience within a recreation of the event, deliberately confusing the viewer’s proprioception and activating the protective tactile system, makers risk activating individualistic concerns.

¹³⁷ Brown, *Fringe Show Felt Like Torture*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

There are entirely comprehensible needs to secure personal safety which means the audience might process the event in terms of their own emotional response, instead of arriving at a political consciousness of the human rights issues involved. Highly sensitised and affect-saturated environments that stage jeopardy to stimulate the body into *sentience* can generate personal protective responses.¹³⁹ To appropriate Alston's terms, in Badac's immersive theatre the 'productive participant' becomes the 'narcissistic participant', spectators who focus 'attention on their own physiological and psychological state'.¹⁴⁰ I contend that in attempting to seduce audiences of the possibility to 'experience' the human rights disaster, the usual boundaries of metaphor are eroded. Through forcing attention on somatic response, the eventual impossibility and irreconcilability of assuming continuity between the theatrical scene and the originary scene is emphasised. Of course, ethical possibility is not eroded entirely here if the very gulf between representation and the real-world happening is encoded as part of the theatre event. However, Badac illuminates the dramaturgical, theatrical and ethical dangers of '*as if*' world-making in human rights theatre.

Badac's human rights theatre is a place where we must communally confront the worst of human cruelty, absorbing these dark apparitions into our bodies, so that we return with a shock-drenched *sentience* to another's pain. For Lambert this creates the inescapable ethico-political responsibility that we turn our sensitised bodies towards an active commitment to 'never again'. Lambert offers us the very limits of his physical endeavour, a penitent body working for self-anointed absolution to act as *pontifex*, building a bridge to the

¹³⁹ 'The audience turns on one another' noted Lyn Gardner in her review of *The Generation of Z*. Gardner witnessed acts of self-preservation despite the discernible aesthetic frame, 'it is every person for themselves, with people pushing and shoving each other aside in the rush to get away'. See: Gardner, 'Edinburgh festival 2014'. Running from zombies is clearly an audience within a fictionalised context, though I would note here that zombies are symbols of refusals of real-world rule, liminal creatures who have often been used allegories and stand-ins for human behaviours, Romero's zombie films satirising capitalism and consumerism complicating an entirely fictive environment.

¹⁴⁰ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, 36.

audience. Though Lambert does not count himself as a playwright, the bullet-language of his scripts make representation of the banality of violence and the repetitious cycles of perpetration – the ‘stuckness’ of the texts, creating comment on the defects of the human rights project to create lasting change. This human rights theatre is one that valorises extremity, pulling no punches, to recreate the pyre of human victims, reigniting Artaud’s visions of the stage as the conflagration that will leave purity. Though Lambert has a discernible style, he has continually experimented with site, space and proximity to maximise the affective relationship with the audience, preferring to work outside of the politics of conventional theatres where he can *impact* audiences who come without preconceptions. Though I have demonstrated Badac’s theatre is one that prioritises rapid and overwhelming sensation, this is not always synonymous with the cultivation of consciousness to the wider problems.

PART TWO: JERICHO HOUSE

Introduction

In this section, I continue my investigation into theatre-makers using place, space, and site to curate a sensory experience leading audiences to *sentient* experiences that might develop the ‘mutual understanding’ necessary for consciousness of human rights abuses.¹ I concentrate on Jonathan Holmes’ plays *Fallujah* (2007), constructed from ‘eyewitness testimony from Iraq’s besieged city’,² staged at the Old Truman Brewery in Brick Lane in the East-End of London;³ and *Katrina* (2009), staged at the OXO Bargehouse on the Southbank. *Fallujah* and *Katrina* adhere to my framework of human rights theatre and restage the white heat of the disaster event. My writing on Holmes does not cover the full span of his theatre work, but rather selects these plays to pursue the enquiry of *sentience* as a mode of engagement through site-specific work and examines the dramaturgical choices intended to promote consciousness as a route for participation in the human rights project. This section assesses

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (London Routledge, 2013), 153. Within the context of Husserl’s discussion of the unity of consciousness and the human body, which he considers to be a starting point for the establishment of a shared social and cognitive world: ‘[. . .] It is only through the connecting of consciousness and body into a natural unity that can be empirically intuited that such a thing as mutual understanding [...] know it for one and the same world about us belonging in common to itself and all other subjects. See: Husserl, *Ideas*, 149–50.

² Jonathan Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq’s Besieged City* (London: Constable & Robinson Limited, 2007), A.

³ Cyrielle Garson notes that *Fallujah* ‘had other parallel lives in the US – it was on the university syllabus for a time and there were a number of amateur productions and protest readings’ and that it travelled to Berlin and Prague in a very ‘stripped-down form’, also remounted in Paris, Tel Aviv, Amsterdam and Glasgow (Garson, 2021, p. 304)- I would, however, want to add a note here that whilst the Ortas’ mounting of ‘Fallujah-Casey’s Pawns’ (<https://www.studio-orta.com/fr/new/18/fallujah-caseys-pawns-prague-city>) and other iterations, acknowledged a collaboration with Holmes, these pop-up performance art interventions using the Haz-Chem suits (first seen at the V&A in 2004) were a very different artistic event to *Fallujah* the play, and I think there is an important distinction here about the viability and will for restaging Holmes’ play in full as implied by Garson’s comments. Indeed, Holmes told me that they had abandoned ideas of reading testimony during the street presentations in Prague as it ‘just wasn’t going to work’ See: Jonathan Holmes, “interview by Ancecy Lax. Interview 2”, 2011 B.

the effective and affective qualities of Holmes' work, examining his development processes, working methods and performances. As noted, there is limited formal scholarship on the work of Jonathan Holmes, and I rely upon reviews and contemporaneous accounts of the two works, but also upon my own spectatorship of the plays and two interviews I conducted with Holmes.⁴ This section of the chapter engages with issues of space and site to examine Holmes' human rights plays and considers the potential for shifts in place to equal shifts in political thinking and activations of consciousness when work is made outside of designated theatre buildings. To gain an understanding of the claims and effect of the work of Holmes, I look towards 'site-specific' and immersive theatre via the paradigm of 'relational aesthetics',⁵ a set of 'artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space'.⁶ Relational Aesthetics rejected the making of conventional art objects, opting to 'engage audiences through situations which called for, and at times demanded, interpersonal interaction, facilitating community among participants'.⁷ I consider the relationship of Holmes' work to visual arts practices, understanding his theatre as *Gesamtkunswerk*, and allowing Rancière's cautionary note about a 'form of hyper-theatre' that might 'optimize the spectacle rather than to celebrate the revolutionary identity of art and life' to permeate this analysis.⁸

Katrina: the storm begins

I had forgotten the cardinal rule of promenade performance, namely that dawdlers are fated to stand on tiptoes at the back of the room. I inch my way around the obstructing bodies, backed

⁴ See Cyrielle Garson's illuminating case-study in *Beyond Documentary Realism, 2021*

⁵ This concept is presented and complemented by critics such as Miwon Kwon, Nick Kaye, Josephine Machon, Mike Pearson, and Fiona Wilkes as detailed at the top of the Chapter.

⁶ Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998), 113.

⁷ Claire Bishop. 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,' *October Magazine*, Fall, 51.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 63.

up to the doorway of the Funky Butt Bar. Some people prefer to remain on the threshold, unsure of the rules of the room, the edges seeming a place of safety and observation. I pick my way across the barroom, blues music wailing all the way up the walls, underscored by staccato bursts from the squat silver television high in the corner of the room, urgently hissing hurricane alerts. The walls are a tapestry of music posters, framed records, wood-block prints, and information signs. Beatrice enters the space, fiercely rolling up her sleeves to begin her evening shift at the bar, the performer's radiating energy and hyper-presence distinguishing her from the rest of us shuffling overcoats, donkeyed with rucksacks and handbags for feet. The real Funky Butt bar in New Orleans scares away clumsy tourists like us. The weather-station warnings and evacuation orders get louder, cutting across each other, and there is a low bass thrum rising from the speakers that is vibrating my chest wall. A man takes the microphone, asserting that we are not going to be frightened off by a storm, that we have seen it all before, that we can drink this one out, and persuades Miranda to come on stage and sing. She sings: a soulful, shining songbird, resonating the room with hope. But the spell of her song splits as the tumult of hurricane Katrina crashes into the room; sounds of howling winds, crashing concrete, and rushing waters form a deafening cacophony as the lights begin to buzz and blink. We are plunged into darkness, people gasp, and others shrink and cover their ears. The noise batters our entire bodies, rattles teeth, and sickeningly rumbles up through our feet before a shaft of light hurls through a door blown open at the other side of the space. There is a white-suited man with a trombone silhouetted in the doorway; all other actors have fled the scene. Everybody begins to push towards the door, as the noise dissipates. I hear a group grumbling ("well, I'm not sure that was called for") as they begin to ascend the stairs to the next level. The bar leaks away down the hall under the feet of audience members carrying the story with them. The frenetic impact of the storm drains away. I am left queuing behind a few stragglers in an emptied inert stage set. As I process

upwards under the gloom of the emergency lighting, I am caught by the neon spray-painted *cri de coeur* 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here'.

Hurricane Katrina was not initially a human rights issue when the storm made land in 2005, it was an indiscriminate natural disaster. Hurricane Katrina became a human rights issue in the US Government's response to the aftermath of the storm: a Presidential Administration irresponsibly slow to protect non-white and poor populations;⁹ a local government network which abrogated responsibility for the welfare of its citizens; the deployment of the National Guard which privileged martial order over aid and assistance; the arbitrary detention of citizens without charge; the presence of private and ad-hoc militias shooting people under the auspices of 'order'; delayed provision of additional medical facilities; deliberate prevention of escape; and in the political fanning of media fires highlighting stories of looting and violence over those of cooperation and community.¹⁰ It became a cauldron of human rights violations, cooking up racism, poverty discrimination, inequality, disability, and old age in the world's richest county. For Jonathan Holmes, the US Government's action after Hurricane Katrina showed that 'the system failed' with his play demonstrating the tragic loss of life 'was something that could have been mitigated but wasn't'.¹¹

⁹ The majority of the c.1,800 deaths caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 were recorded as acute and chronic diseases and trauma (c.70%) resulting from the aftermath of the disaster where medical aid was lacking, with Markwell and Ratard concluding that 'many of these deaths due to chronic diseases would have been prevented had emergency and hospital services been undisrupted following the storm'. See: Poppy M Markwell, and Raoult C. Ratard. 'Deaths Directly Caused by Hurricane Katrina.' (Louisiana Federal Government, 2008.)

¹⁰ Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 12-18.

Brinkley's opus on the devastation wreaked upon the Mississippi Gulf Coast, *The Great Deluge*, lays the blame squarely upon the withdrawal of Congressional funding for securing flood defences and strengthening the levees in the 2003-4 period, despite a warning from FEMA of the likelihood of a major category hurricane. See: Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*, 2007, 1-37.

¹¹ Jonathan Holmes, 'Audience to flee floods as South Bank play recreates the horror of Katrina,' <https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/audience-to-flee-floods-as-south-bank-play-recreates-the-horror-of-katrina-6744050.html>, accessed January 1, 2010.

When Michael Billington of *The Guardian* was dispatched to review Holmes' *Katrina* in September 2009, he reported the play's 'shocking' revelation of human rights abuses and Federal disregard was 'defused' by the stop-start ruptures of the episodic promenade as the play moved through the storeys of the building. Billington recorded the 'chosen structure is a little strange: verbatim testimony from the victims is sandwiched between a Punchdrunk-style promenade and a New Orleans funeral, as if the show were torn between the agitational and the experiential'.¹² In examining Jonathan Holmes's immersive promenade pieces, this chapter section further explores the question of what it means to be 'torn between the agitational and the experiential' when theatre-makers attempt to resonate human rights issues by heightening sensory response to the performance event. The play was a sought-out sell-out, but the press response seemed to adhere to the same template as Holmes' previous play *Fallujah*. Reviewers lauded his intent, his enterprise, his concept, his ethical address, the political import, but were critical of the play's obdurate dramaturgy. They found a static heart in *Katrina*, both in terms of the script and the awkward hiatus to the promenade form, where the audience were asked to take chairs for the 'play' proper. Below I examine the development of *sentience*, or felt-understanding, in Holmes' plays, as a route to achieve the relational cognisance and political awakening of 'consciousness', looking at his attempts to construct theatrical architecture to place the audience within the disaster moment, animating affective circulation to make sensate worlds.¹³ I discuss dramaturgy, construction of the performance event, framing of spectatorship, and where the 'experiential' of the *mise-en-scène* might overwhelm the 'agitational', the intended human rights-based message.

¹² Michael Billington, 'Katrina: Review,' <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/06/theatre>, accessed January 1, 2010.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies,' *Social Text* (2004), 120.

To draw down Billington's use of the term 'experiential', the programme note/treatise to *Katrina*, entitled 'Theatre and Experience' is something of a love letter by Holmes to the 'live experience' of theatre and the sensory, corporeal, cognitive and emotional demands that it makes of the audience.¹⁴ Holmes positions *Katrina* as a work with 'a theatrical emphasis on experience' and connects this with the promise of achieving a more penetrating and profound understanding of the disaster.¹⁵ Picking up Adam Alston's identification of theatre as 'experience machine', I consider constituents of Holmes' theatre 'experience' and the machinations to provoke sensory arousal – 'not only visual but also aural, tactile, olfactory'¹⁶ – to release new modes of knowing. Attempts by the production to form new networks of relationships between 'text', performer, space, and audience, are intended to agitate political consciousness in the viewer. In his introduction to the play *Fallujah*, Holmes likewise notes his framing of the verbatim content is unique for its 'theatricality of presentation'.¹⁷ In contrast to the work of ice&fire covered in the previous chapter, Holmes asserted for *Fallujah* he wanted avoid the prospect of a line of script-clutching actors delivering monologues, 'that approach is like a radio play, quite sad. It gives a sense of avoiding theatricality because of the serious material. I wanted a way to have people think about it more abstractly'.¹⁸ By abstracting the spatial arrangements of the performance encounter, allowing the battlefield to grow up around the audience, Holmes endeavoured to create a sense of 'immediacy', noting, 'in reality we react to space bodily – we are moved in a physical as well as in an intellectual or an emotional sense. Why not too in the theatre'.¹⁹

¹⁴ Jonathan Holmes, *Katrina: A play of New Orleans* (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), Introduction.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 144.

¹⁸ Jane Perlez, 'An Assault in Iraq, a Stage Hit in London,' *The New York Times*, May 29, 2007.

¹⁹ Holmes, *Katrina*. Introduction.

Holmes is in select company for his use of immersive aesthetic forms to protest the action of governments and complicities of state actors. ‘To do a verbatim play in a traditional theatre seems to me like it would be going halfway’, Holmes relayed in interview, ‘you’re trying to get close and then backing away’.²⁰ As Young observed of Holmes’ work, ‘he purposefully injected into the *mise-en-scène* a theatricality that he finds conspicuously absent in most other recent verbatim plays’.²¹ Holmes has sought to combine the directness and human-scale of testimony with an enveloping experiential model, to create a ‘total theatre’ with an activist aim.²² Garson designates this approach as ‘post-realism’ in her reading of *Fallujah*, as verbatim practice melds with the ‘disjointed, visual and sensory domain of the postdramatic’, blurring ‘the distinction between the spheres of the aesthetic and the real’.²³ Looking to other pieces blurring ‘the aesthetic and the real’, and exploring human rights issues with immersive forms, I highlight Cardboard Citizens’ moving promenade play *Mincemeat* (2009) about the offhand deployment of a homeless man’s body as part of a decoy operation in World War II.²⁴ Despite some clunky shifts linking the archipelago of performance environments, the successful notices *Mincemeat* garnered suggests there is

²⁰ Jonathan Holmes, *Katrina: A play of New Orleans*. (London : Methuen Drama, 2009). Introduction.

²¹ Young, Stuart. 2009. ‘Playing with Documentary Theatre: Aalst and Taking Care of Baby,’ *New Theatre Quarterly* (Cambridge University Press) 25 (1): 74.

²² This (partially) assumes that the seating configuration in traditional ‘end-on’ staging is a barrier to sensate engagement with the text, and though that is certainly both a hazard and a weapon of this arrangement, as this thesis argues, we can still feel from the back row.

²³ Garson, *Beyond Documentary Realism*, 224. Garson explains post-realist verbatim theatre as follows: ‘its inherent verbocentric premises do not cohere with its inflated phenomenological aesthetic dimension in performance, apparently thriving and luxuriating in their dissonance. In this changed atmosphere, whereby new organising principles entirely remodel the verbatim theatre architecture, dispensing with mimesis and its minutiae of “accurate” details, the documentary component tends to be disavowed and evaporates into a complex and constant dispossessing aesthetic reformulation, as if driven by an unabating and roaring compulsion to exceed verbatim reality, to deconstruct once and for all the very last emanations of the referent.’ Garson, *Beyond Documentary Realism*, 221.

²⁴ I would also want to draw attention to other productions that explore human rights issues with an immersive form, including Look Left Look Right’s piece *Caravan* (2007) and their later work *Counted* (2009) about voter engagement which was staged in the debating chamber of County Hall in London. We might also look to Shunt’s *Money* (2009) which was spectacle in the supreme but using Zola’s *L’Argent* as source text, did have something to say about capitalism. I would also include two plays about human trafficking, the remarkable staging of Lucy Kirkwood’s *It Felt Empty When the Heart Went at First but It Is Alright Now* (2009) which was in a conventional theatre building, but disrupted the use of the space, and Bisset and Smith’s deeply shocking piece *Roadkill* (2010) where the performance started on a bus, before playing out through multiple rooms at a repurposed domestic location.

potential for this dramaturgical approach, ‘Jackson's humanist production successfully binds all these elements together’.²⁵

In considering Holmes’ work, I am interested in receptivity to spectacles of violence and disaster, and the ideological frameworks that delimit spectator engagement, and lean on Finburgh Delijani’s unpicking of the spectacle of conflict within theatre performance, framed within her assertion:

...theatre perhaps better than any other medium, bears within its mechanics the possibility to disrupt the parts of our consciousness and senses with which we apprehend the world around us, and to foster new ways of understanding the hegemony of meaning-making and attendant practices of perception and power.²⁶

This focus on Holmes’ theatre practice and his aims to ‘disrupt the parts of our consciousness’ is an elaboration and exploration of Machon’s provocation that politics within immersive practices have ‘as much do with reconnecting the perceiver with their affective selves as with sharing an ideological perspective’.²⁷ Holmes designates both pieces as ‘site-specific’ in notes to the published texts, also naming them as ‘promenade’ pieces, referencing the pageant staging of *Fallujah* as akin to medieval cycles, the audience repositioning themselves to see the action developing in a new ‘site’ within the space.²⁸ *Katrina* followed a more traditional processive format, with the audience moving from the gathering space, a New Orleans tourist office, festooned with articles about the city, through seven further location-based rooms distributed over four storeys of The Bargehouse. For Holmes, the promenade of *Katrina* was intended to portray ‘an odyssey through a drowned space’,

²⁵ Michael Billington, ‘Minceat Review,’ *The Guardian*, June 19, 2009.

²⁶ Clare Finburgh Delijani, *Watching War on the Twenty-First Century Stage: Spectacles of Conflict* (London: Methuen Drama, 2017), 56.

²⁷ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 119.

²⁸ Holmes noted the irreproducibility of the ‘specific’ production at the ‘site’ of The Bargehouse in London for any staging of the text for any prospective re-productions.

fashioning a before-and-after the hurricane temporal transition as the audience exit through mirror spaces, each location now in devastation.²⁹ The staging of dilemma and rupture within the drama, with somatic and psychic tendrils snaking through the work, animates the human rights issues for those caught within the disaster event.

Formation of Jericho House

Jericho House was founded in 2008 by Dr Jonathan Holmes, and since its inception has delivered several artistic and campaigning theatre projects. Although the company has gradually become dormant, these projects have also included a production of *The Tempest* that toured to the Middle East (2011), *Revolution Square* for The Bush Theatre (2012) and a promenade site work for the National Theatre of Wales about the Somali community of Cardiff called *De Gabay* (2013) concerned with displacement and diaspora, racism, and strategies of ‘integration’. As an artist-in-residence for Peace Direct, Holmes made a documentary film about global conflict resolution involving a hydra of public-intellectuals entitled ‘Perpetual Peace’ (2010), and a bold series of think-tank summits with heavy-weight cultural figures under the banner-headline, ‘What is the point of Art?’ (2010). Jericho House operated as a London-based small-scale company with claims to some ‘big-name friends’ from the public fora.³⁰ It was well-networked and well-supported by larger cultural organisations such as the Barbican, the Young Vic, and the Institute of Contemporary Arts.³¹

²⁹Holmes, *Katrina*. Introduction

It is interesting to note here Jericho Houses’ 2011 staging of *The Tempest* which toured Israel and Palestine before returning to play at St. Giles Cripplegate, London in association with The Barbican. The allusions to *The Tempest* ripple through the play *Katrina* – where despite this being a ‘testimony’ play, and maybe to smooth over the acquisition and use of this testimony, characters are called Miranda and Cal.

³⁰ Jonathan Holmes, “British Library Interview,” interview by Annecy Lax, July 8, 2010, A.

³¹ *Fallujah* was produced in association with the ICA, *Katrina* was produced in association with the Young Vic and *The Tempest* received support from the Barbican. There are less overtly political pieces in the back catalogue, works that call to Holmes’ background as an Early Modern scholar; as part of a ‘Utopia’ season, Jericho House also staged a new play about John Donne, *Into Thy Hands* (2011), a restaging of the Jacobean

The founding principles of Jericho House were based on a lexicon and methodology of artistic collaboration, a desire to radicalise the theatrical form, an interest in politically urgent content, to make work with an ‘ethical and transformative purpose’.³²

Jericho House’s seven-point statement of intent led with, ‘Jericho is a theatre company specialising in inventive relationships between theatre, music and performance space’ with a concentration on the themes of ‘hospitality, refuge and the city’.³³ The idea of ‘refuge’, a human rights theme that dominated the previous chapter, drives the stories of *Fallujah* and *Katrina*. In our interview, Holmes asserted much of his work had a human rights focus, but that he would feel presumptuous in calling Jericho House, ‘a human rights theatre company’.³⁴ Holmes offered that his is a ‘theatre of ethics’, positioning it as ‘grass-roots work’ as opposed to belonging to the supranational structures that constitute the human rights corpus. He stressed that human rights were woven into the fabric of his explorations of the function of the state, as were the manufactured social divisions which maintain hegemonic power structures, and the governmental populist degeneration of social justice to construct an underclass, but that to declare an affiliation, would put his work ‘into a box’.³⁵ Holmes is direct in his assertion that theatre must ‘challenge the powerful, be the moral benchmark, the reminder of our humanity, and the asserter of rights’.³⁶ In our interview, Holmes articulated the ethical well-source of his work:

I think there is no point in doing theatre that has no connection to the world around us. If you don’t want to change people’s lives, otherwise why do it?... I don’t think

Masque *Love Freed* (2010), and a selection of Beckett monologues with a choral backdrop packaged as *Old Earth* for the 2012 Spitalfields Festival.

³² Jonathan Holmes, ‘Jericho House: About Us,’ 2010 B, <http://www.jerichohouse.org.uk/2010/about.html> accessed March 4, 2011.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Jonathan Holmes, ‘British Library Interview,’ 2010.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

there is any point engaging with art unless you think you can do that, by definition, that's what art does.³⁷

His work is defined by a reach towards theatre experiences which 'shatters boundaries' between the audience and the work, between the audience and each other, looking for the creation of temporary communities reminded of their humanity through co-engagement with the other, and are 'empathetic and egalitarian, and so profoundly ethical'.³⁸ This nod to Levinasian thought, aligns with Nicholas Ridout's description of a modern ethical theatre that: 'encourages the spectator to stop seeing the performance as an exploration of his or her own subjectivity and, instead, to take it as an opportunity to experience an encounter with someone else, [it] invites the spectator to assume the fragile life of the other'.³⁹ For this discussion, I am particularly interested in Ridout's use of the phrase 'to *assume* the fragile life', and the idea of duty this endows, but also ideas of investiture and bodily transposition, how an audience member might temporarily inhabit, might change places. I want to note the continuities and discontinuities between the political and the ethical, and where evocation of the 'ethical' might lack the nailed-on commitment of the political, but also gestures towards longer-lines of care during and after the process. The ethical might also take us to awareness of framing, appropriation, repetitions of supremacy, which I question in Holmes' work. By contextualising the ideological and aesthetic qualities of Holmes' theatre, designed to develop *sentience* in his audience, I examine the construction of his productions as transportations to 'change people's lives', the activation of political consciousness outside of the theatre experience, and how this aligns with his ideas of an 'ethical theatre'. To this end, I now explore Holme's conception and configuration of immersive theatre.

³⁷ Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010.

³⁸ Holmes, *Katrina*, Introduction.

³⁹ Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre and Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 8.

Holmes' immersive theatre

The playing of the work in a non-designated theatre space, using 'immersive' and 'total' staging methodologies, is aimed to be a revival to jaded eyes and incitement to political activity. Both *Katrina* and *Fallujah* are intended to be 'challenging, formally innovative' pieces of work, that employ reconfigurative staging approaches and audience-making processes to disrupt and (re)conceive thinking about political events.⁴⁰ Holmes states he wants the theatre experience of Jericho House to have 'a palpable effect on our audiences' and to 'find new languages for theatre'.⁴¹ In Holmes' conception, this animate audience is more porous to emotional contagion, and imbued with shared affective resonance is more open to messages that activate new behaviours.⁴² Through deployment of participatory theatre traditions, the plays are designed to swell the sensory response of the audience: from the configuration of gathering to dispersal; movement within the space; blurred boundaries of where text begins and ends; through proximity and direct address; an ability to alter the order of gaze and obtain a plural perspective; to three-dimensional soundscapes and surrounding staging platforms. From entertaining night out to provocative experience. Holmes states: 'It follows that such a theatrical experience shatters boundary between several parallel incarnations of 'us' and 'them', of the powerful and the powerless'.⁴³ Holmes' works activate biopolitical interactions to make site-political meanings. Holmes argues blurred boundaries between actor and audience heightens the audience's capacity to involve themselves with the content, his conventions seeking 'to implicate the audience viscerally in the action' so that 'watching this play [becomes] intrinsically a political act'.⁴⁴ For Holmes, the act of immersion offers a political and ethical catalyst; in the case of *Fallujah*, by

⁴⁰ Jonathan Holmes, 'Jericho House: About Us.'

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (London: Duke University Press, 1995)

⁴³ Jonathan Holmes, 'Jericho House: About Us.'

⁴⁴ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 144.

mirroring the ‘theatre of war’, the sensitisation of the space will in-turn animate an ideological battleground. It is a question Finburgh Delijani returns to in *Watching War*, ‘how, then, has recent theatre, itself a spectacle, enabled us to see the modes and apparatuses that produce spectacles of war’.⁴⁵ These multi-mediated dialogues between the play and the audience are characterised by the attempt to engender a visceral intervention, where the (re)location of the event in a more unorthodox space is to refocus the content and reconceive the place of performance as resisting standardised socio-cultural codes and norms.

The immersive aesthetic of *Katrina* is embedded within and without the play: extra-textually, Holmes celebrates theatre’s capacity to ‘wholly surround its audience with tangible reality’ and he draws a relationship between the state of being ‘immersed in its sensual space’ and ‘sharing responsibility’ for the human rights questions raised by the event.⁴⁶ Similarly, in the notes for *Fallujah* he asserts this is a ‘play designed to be staged in a fluid and dynamic fashion, with performers and audience sharing the same space and often the same light, and with little or no ‘fourth wall type boundary’,⁴⁷ where ‘the action happens all around them and among them as appropriate; a kind of inverted in-the-round’.⁴⁸ Holmes proposes: ‘conceptual and spatial reconfiguration in how theatre works is not in the service of a new naturalism, where the focus is on representation, but rather attends to the actual experience of those present’.⁴⁹ Machon speaks for the power of an ‘experiential’ and ‘visceral’ theatre, arguing, ‘this style produces a response of disturbance that can be simultaneously challenging, and exhilarating, at once unsettling and pleasurable’.⁵⁰ In these productions

⁴⁵ Finburgh Delijani, *Watching War on the Twenty-First Century Stage: Spectacles of Conflict*, 3.

⁴⁶ Holmes, *Katrina*, Introduction.

⁴⁷ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 144.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 147.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 147

⁵⁰ Josephine Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics Redefining Visceral Performance*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 13.

Holmes is seeking to make ‘living’ worlds animated in sensitised spaces to shake and shift audience engagement from concerned spectator, to those who have assumed the fragile life, and who now understand their duty to the other. Here, I am also reminded of de Certeau’s use of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘anthropological space’, to access ideas of embodied space as the location where human experience and consciousness takes on material and spatial form.⁵¹ The immersive, enveloping form of theatre Holmes fashioned for *Fallujah* and *Katrina*, can be seen as an expression of the desire to place the audience at the ‘centre of the experience’, and their experience at the centre of a ‘transformative’ outcome.⁵² Holmes’ interactive theatre aims for a multi-modal spectatorship with a more saturated, proximate inter-human relationship between performer and spectator, where the topographical position of the spectator in relation to the action is intended to provoke the *sentient* felt-understanding, intended to lead to a more resonant consciousness of the human rights issues involved.

In ‘Shared bodies, shared spaces’, Fischer-Lichte posits the audience becomes dynamised by the effect of immersive experience, freed from the more rigid posture imposed by the proscenium delineation. ‘The constant collision and disruption of frames repeatedly put the audience into situations where they could not react “automatically”’, Fischer-Lichte argues, they no longer operate under a ‘given set of rules’.⁵³ Whilst I argue there are still persistent ‘rules’, within this ‘shared body’ paradigm, the audience plays an unavoidable role in the performative *affect* of the work; their presence helps to not only define meaning from the text, but also defines place, situation and category of observation:

⁵¹ Anthropological space vindicated the existential space of the night, ‘haunted by myths, dreams and hallucinations’ which carries interesting resonances about the powerful forces of the fictive upon experience. See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Edited and Trans. by Donald Landes (London : Routledge, 2012) 74. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

⁵² Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, 214.

⁵³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 48.

The collision and impact of frames plunged the audience into crisis. For one, they were permanently deciding through which frame to view the action. Moreover, any given boundaries between those different frames became increasingly blurred and eventually invalidated... Each of them concerned the relationship between agency and spectatorship.⁵⁴

The audience share more of the light with the performers, no longer static in imposed darkness; the gaze can travel around the light spill, around the unfolding drama, to the actors and to each other. The audience gaze in the immersive-promenade form also moves away from the watching-watched/subject-other dialectic that a stage/audience spatial dynamic obligates in many building-based theatres, with accompanying potential for an enacted process of exchange and engagement.⁵⁵ Now on their feet, they are equipped with a more mobile and adjustable gaze, from general surveillance to forensic scrutiny. As the second of such works, *Katrina* can be seen as Holmes' attempt to refine an animating intention to connect the experiential with a felt understanding of the somatic and phrenic effect of human rights abuses, of injustice, of state brutality inflicted on a traumatised citizenry.

Holmes develops the recasting of the audience as 'witnesses' in the preface to *Katrina*, asserting the 'fully enveloping, four-dimensional space' of his theatre is a conduit for 'a re-imagining of the role of the audience. It ceases to be a band of consumers, paying for the familiar, and becomes instead a collective of witnesses, vital to the event's integrity'.⁵⁶ This redesignation of the audience as 'witnesses' ushers in the solemn role of responsabilised onlookers to the human rights atrocity and asserts the merit of the unfolding events as a shared political endeavour. Holmes advocates this change to the mode of cognitive and somatic processing of the dramatic events can make an audience *sentient* to an

⁵⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 48.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 38

⁵⁶ Holmes, *Katrina*, Introduction.

external situation. The relocation of the audience member to Fallujah or New Orleans as involved witness is intended to render the very act of watching as reflexively animated and therefore politicised.⁵⁷ I recognise his proposition for experiential theatre as visceral pathway to ‘hearts and minds’ as pregnant with possibility, the sensory surround has potential to place us within, develop *sentience* and to affect consciousness. Holmes argues that the state of witnessing is empirically proven to be central to social development and ‘core to the origin of consciousness’, arguing that; ‘in terms of human rights, witnessing is perhaps the most human right.⁵⁸ Witnessing is absolutely core to who we are’.⁵⁹ There is optimism in Holmes’ words, in his conception of an enhanced and integral role for the audience, but of course, audience members may choose to exist within the drama as aesthetic ‘consumers’ within the experience economy and may remain apolitical. For Holmes the text of *Fallujah* is comprised of ‘acts of witnessing’, where the act of bearing witness is ‘inescapably ethical, as it requires us to take responsibility for our responses to what we experience’.⁶⁰ Holmes is insistent his audiences are conscious these plays have direct relationship to real-world events and real-world human rights contraventions – ‘Nothing is described or presented that was not directly witnessed’ – to present this inescapable ethico-political responsibility.⁶¹ In the preface to the text, Holmes is unapologetic about the political saturation of the work: ‘it is not incompatible with the veracity of these things to condemn the perpetrators... it seems to me an evasion of responsibility – even perhaps unethical – not to take a stand on the morality of the event’.⁶² *Fallujah* ‘makes no claim to objectivity’ he asserts.⁶³ If an ethical theatre asks, ‘how shall I act’,⁶⁴ in *Fallujah* we see Holmes as activist, speaking stridently about lack of

⁵⁷ Holmes informs us that *his* experience of collecting the testimony, is witnessed through the production of his text, is further witnessed through the presence of spectators.

⁵⁸ Holmes, ‘Interview 2,’ 2011.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, xiv.

⁶¹ Holmes, ‘Fallujah: Descriptive Booklet’.

⁶² Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 145.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Rideout, *Theatre and Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

action, uncompromising about transgressions and hopeful for transformations. I argue here that the evocation of the witness underscores claims for the veracity, accountability, and the intended ‘transformation’ to consciousness within the audience through his immersive theatre modes.

Jericho House: occupying spaces

‘We are invited to occupy buildings’ contends Holmes, to ‘create idealistic and supple performance environments for the staging of dynamic, ethical work’.⁶⁵ In May 2007 Jonathan Holmes was ‘invited to occupy’ the Old Truman Brewery for the premier of his new ‘testimony play’ *Fallujah*.⁶⁶ The Brewery is situated geographically and culturally in the gentrification of the near-East End and its cavernous interior has been cauterised to create unitary spaces for pop-up shops, bohemian bars and exhibition galleries, marketing itself as industrial chic backdrop. Holmes described the venue as ‘a vast and impressive found space’,⁶⁷ affording him a (relatively) blank canvas in which to stage his theatre installation, suppling some of the environmental kudos and pre-packaged countercultural cachet associated with the location.⁶⁸ Whilst this was a ‘non-traditional’ theatre location serving to reposition the nature and quality of the audience’s presence in *Fallujah*, the evocative phrase ‘found space’ is labouring to usher in ideas of discovery, departure and outsidersness.⁶⁹ As

⁶⁵ Holmes, *Katrina*, Introduction.

⁶⁶ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 147.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

I ask Holmes about an article written for *The Guardian* entitled ‘Balloons for Fallujah’ in which he outlined the tortuous process of bringing *Fallujah* to production, ‘At one stage, we were set for a West End opening; at another we thought we’d never find a venue’ (See: Jonathan Holmes, ‘Balloons in Fallujah,’ *The Guardian*, 01 May. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/may/01/iraq.theatre>). Holmes confirmed that the search for an alternative space had enabled a ‘good outcome’, as his plans for the staging of the play were ‘incompatible’ with the West End named theatre buildings that they approached. (See: Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010.)

⁶⁸ K. Oakley and A. C. Pratt, ‘Brick Lane: community-driven innovation,’ in *Local Knowledge: Case studies of four innovative places* (London: NESTA, 2010), 28-39.

⁶⁹ In a booklet designed to attract funding for further incarnations and re-stagings of *Fallujah*, Holmes describes the play as a ‘found space’ event (See: Jonathan Holmes, *Fallujah: Descriptive Booklet*. 2007 D), and also as a ‘promenade’ (*ibid.*), and elsewhere he depicts the play as taking place in a ‘specially designed space’ (Oakley &

Jen Harvie argues, the act of congregation at the non-theatre site is a way of re-occupying territory in a corporatised urban place(lessness),⁷⁰ creating an experience of ‘insiderness’ to replace feelings of ‘outsiderness’, or as an ““authentic” sensory experience from the alienation of our surroundings’.⁷¹ For Baz Kershaw the move away from designated theatre buildings is a means to subvert the dominant ideological drive, and therefore to create work which is more labile in its ability to challenge the prevailing political system, the potential to activate an ethical crisis.⁷² Site-specific work is a theatrical genre that is, by its nature, in process, as it seeks new spatial, temporal, mediated and inter-human relationships. Not only does the form raise questions about our interaction with pre-designated places, highlighting ‘contemporary versions of dislocation’, but it ‘also permits entry into a debate around theatreness’;⁷³ and in particular how we use the un/reality of theatre to (re)play and (re)place events shared in our collective imaginary. In this conception, experiential theatre might form communal kindling of consciousness, to move towards a more permeating sense of a social and political truth. Holmes certainly believes rearrangements of the playing space, this resetting of the territory, has an impact on the reception of the material performed: ‘Theatre is able to dismantle one world and assemble another, both metaphorically and actually, all around us. The role of the theatrical space is consequently not just scenic, but essentially political’.⁷⁴ As Nick Kaye contends, the site-event can be seen to (re)order relationships by using ‘strategies which work against the assumptions and stabilities of site and location’,⁷⁵ all of which has the capacity to propel the audience into a *sentient* alert state, a different

Pratt, ‘Brick Lane: community-driven innovation,’ 97), and elsewhere still a ‘specially tailored space’ (Jonathan Holmes, *The Jericho House*. 2008 C).

⁷⁰ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play - Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

⁷¹ David Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Publishing, 2013), 49.

⁷² Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), 39.

⁷³ Fiona Wilkie, ‘The Production of ‘Site’: Site-Specific Theatre,’ in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, edited by Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 102.

⁷⁴ Holmes, *Katrina*, Introduction.

⁷⁵ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

category of watchfulness. However, Tomlin reminds us that ‘there no longer appears to be anything inherently radical about performing outside of theatre spaces’, the (re)animation of place as an enactment of ideology, the innovative and unconventional soon becomes incorporated into the official frame.⁷⁶ As Harvie references, many mainstream companies in the mid-2000s were uncritically adopting site-related practices as a genre category, ‘as a convenient marker of a set of ideas’.⁷⁷ Kershaw also acknowledges the annulling of the radical when he notes that, ‘mainstream culture will always catch up with particular avant-gardes and incorporate them into dominant ideologies because that is their socio-political destiny at their inception’.⁷⁸ However, as Philip Auslander concludes, it is difficult for an artform to remain distinct and detached when delivering change, an artist might have to disrupt *within* the machine to deliver social critique. He suggests instead, a political artist might offer, ‘strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasizing the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant without claiming to transcend its terms’.⁷⁹ Thinking of Lambert and Holmes’ pursuit of a performance frame fostering alternative communities of political action, I turn to Tomlin’s codicil argument that ‘rather than seeking a deconstruction or destruction of the existing power structures’ works that tacitly align to commercialised structures, also ‘offer a palliative model of how we might better survive them’.⁸⁰

Holmes’ design and dramaturgy are true to the festival promenade form as Edgar defines it, and evoking Freire and Boal, he makes claim for ‘Festivals of the Oppressed’, where ‘the audience is able to choose what to look at, to construct its own spatial relationship

⁷⁶ Liz Tomlin, *British Theatre Companies: 1995-2014* (London: Methuen Drama, 2015), 115.

⁷⁷ Harvie, *Fair Play - Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, 88.

⁷⁸ Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance*, 91.

⁷⁹ Philip Auslander, ‘From Acting to Performance Essays,’ in *Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 61.

⁸⁰ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, 190.

with the event, to switch not just the direction but the very mode of its attention'.⁸¹ Drawing on Bakhtin, this kind of theatre, Edgar asserts, can present, the 'horizontal, unfinished world of carnival' generating 'experience with a variance, a simultaneity, and most of all the unevenness', where a range of experiences, whether grotesque or noble, benighted, or transcendent, might be 'simultaneous inhabitants of the same processional space'.⁸² Bakhtin argued for carnival as a 'utopia' that is, 'enacted without footlights, no separation of participants and spectators. Everyone participates. While the usual world order is suspended, the new utopian order which has come to replace it is sovereign and embraces all'.⁸³ I suggest Holmes aspires to a similar suspension in *Fallujah* and *Katrina* where a cessation in the usual world order is intended to offer incitements to new worlds and *utopias* outside the theatre. There are elements of Holmes' practice — its immersivity; its transportational form; its attentiveness to the voices from the margins; and its overall *activist* intent — enmeshed with Bakhtinian readings of the carnival. Above all by the 'principled' hope for a form of 'exorcism' where 'the people as a whole' were 'aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community'.⁸⁴ Although Holmes' work challenges the distinction between spectator and participant, unlike carnival, it does not intend to fully 'collapse' that distinction.⁸⁵ And as Wilkie reminds, 'to be site-specific is also to be audience-specific', thus I am vigilant here against uncritically claiming the potential for collective metamorphosis, especially in a more heterogenous audience group.⁸⁶ Rancière, picks apart the notions of 'community' and the 'paradoxical relationship between the 'apart' and the 'together'' that co-exists within an 'aesthetic community' structured through artistic practice.⁸⁷ This 'distribution of the

⁸¹ David Edgar, *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1990), 240

⁸² *Ibid.* 242.

⁸³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 265.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12. & *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁵ See: Cecil Gutzmore, 'Carnival, The State and The Black Masses in The United Kingdom,' in *Black British Culture and Society*, ed. Kwesi Owusu, (London: Routledge, 1999)

⁸⁶ Wilkie, 'The Production of 'Site': Site-Specific Theatre,' 90.

⁸⁷ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 59.

sensible', the 'sensory fabric' existing between an audience is used by Holmes to fuel emotional contagion and affective resonance for political ends.⁸⁸ However, whilst Rancière proposes that new artworks constitute new communities, and new relationships in political praxis, Holmes and Lambert's plays have relational barriers to the construction of sustainable communities motivated to act on the human rights issues. Holmes circles around the potential efficacy of 'critical carnival', and the forms of theatrical inversions and 'up-endings' proposed as transforming contradictions between 'critical texts and hegemonic contexts' into productive, restorative, 'positive paradoxes' which might enable consciousness of over-arching power structures.⁸⁹ To examine these categories of immersivity and site in Holmes' human rights theatre, I now turn to focus on *Fallujah*.

***Fallujah*: Activists Theatre**

Fallujah ran for five weeks, with the substantial press coverage that Holmes received mostly in support of the political significance of the subject matter of the play;⁹⁰ these stories from the Iraq conflict further stirring the muddied waters of an already controversial and complex war. Holmes' *Fallujah* sites the audience within events, bordered by stacked metal hospital beds, battalions of Hazchem suits, canisters and first-aid trunks, and a field ambulance.

Unlike other plays about the Iraq war in this period, David Hare's collage piece *Stuff Happens* (2004), Gregory Burke's documentary study, *Blackwatch* (2006), Simon Stephens' *Motortown* (2006) and Abdulrazzaq's *Baghdad Wedding* (2007), *Fallujah* aims to place

⁸⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2004), 7.

⁸⁹ Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance*, 230.

⁹⁰ *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *London Evening Standard*, *What's on Stage*, *The British Theatre Guide*, several bloggers, and *The New York Times* all reviewed *Fallujah* in May 2007.

witness accounts amidst the white heat of a (recreated) battle zone.⁹¹ Philip Fisher summarised the play as ‘a collage of interviews and re-enactments that builds a picture of life (and death) in a city the size of Edinburgh, around 500,000 inhabitants, that was practically razed to the ground’.⁹² However, the piece was not without dispute. Reviewing for *The New York Times*, Jane Perlez declared ‘Mr. Holmes makes no pretense of objectivity’, baulking against its ‘anti-American’ sentiment and the assertions of the use of chemical weapons, ‘an allegation made by left-wing critics of the war but never substantiated’.⁹³ The full story of what happened in the Ba-athist stronghold of Fallujah in 2004 remains occluded by an obfuscation of public record,⁹⁴ but it is a story of war crimes and human rights abuses on an appalling scale, of blanket bombings, indiscriminate shooting of civilians, heinous acts of torture, the annihilation of hospitals and medical centres, and the literal liquidation of citizens by aerial assaults of white phosphorous and other chemical munitions, largely in redress for the earlier killing of Blackwater Security mercenaries acting outside of the legal structures of military engagement.⁹⁵

In some regards the naissance of the play *Fallujah*, was ideological, and not theatrical. Holmes attributes the making of the play to his ‘small identity as an activist’ after he became involved with the conflict-resolution charity, Peace Direct in 2004,⁹⁶ his intellect

⁹¹ In an article contemplating the ‘pitfalls’ of verbatim theatre, ‘Does Verbatim Still Talk the Talk,’ Lyn Gardner did not stint in her criticism of *Fallujah*, ‘fiction and the imagination can do those things, too; and although I think it perfectly possible that theatres will be reviving Simon Stephens's Iraq-war inspired *Motortown* in 50 years’ time, I very much doubt that anyone will remember *Called to Account* or *Fallujah*.’ (See: Lyn Gardner, ‘Fallujah Review,’ *The Guardian*, 07 May, 2007). *Motortown* has had at least 5 revivals by different theatre companies since the premier run and been staged in the US and Australia.

⁹² Philip Fisher, ‘Fallujah Review’, *British Theatre Guide*, May 2007.

⁹³ Perlez, ‘An Assault in Iraq, a Stage Hit in London.’

⁹⁴ The story remains deniable because journalists and United Nations rapporteurs were prevented from entering the city by the US military and their allies.

⁹⁵ In 2020, departing US President, Donald Trump pardoned four security guards from the private military firm Blackwater who were serving jail sentences for killing 14 civilians including two children in Baghdad in 2007, a massacre that sparked an international outcry over the use of mercenaries in war.

⁹⁶ Jonathan Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010.

and habitude of thoughtful observation gaining him access to top-level meetings with the organisation's director, Nobel Prize nominee, Scilla Elworthy.⁹⁷ In 2005 Elworthy convened a seminar entitled 'Learning from Fallujah',⁹⁸ inviting 'two British Major Generals', 'a clutch of diplomats and ambassadors', 'journalists, NGOs' and, 'the person who inspired the character of the Vicar of Baghdad, the Canon of Coventry Cathedral, Andrew White'.⁹⁹

Elworthy traced the creation of the play back to this 'Chatham House' gathering during a post-performance discussion of *Fallujah* in June 2007, '[w]e spent a day talking, and sitting in that room, as a fly on the wall, was Jonathan Holmes, and as a result he wrote this play'.¹⁰⁰

Here I pick up a skein in this thesis, the returning role of testimony in human rights theatre and the performance of documentation to create connection to real-world political events.

Holmes took testimonial material from that meeting and combined it with documentary sources, newspaper articles and speeches, along with writings from Canadian journalist, Dahr Jamail, interview material from Rana Al-Aiouby, an activist and documentary filmmaker who worked to get vulnerable people out of the militarised zone of the city, and from UK human rights activist, Jo Wilding.¹⁰¹ Wilding 'travelled on her own to Fallujah as an independent activist, both to act as a witness and to assist in the delivery of medical supplies.'¹⁰² These 'eyewitness testimony' accounts to the escalation of military hostility and

⁹⁷ Elworthy heads up the Oxford Research Group and was instrumental in the development of Stafford-Clark and Soans' play *Talking to Terrorists*. Elworthy has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on three occasions and is a member of the World Future Council and the International Task Force on Preventive Diplomacy.

⁹⁸ The meeting came from a report Elworthy authored for the influential Oxford Research Group on recommendations for future urban military campaigns against guerrilla insurgencies after reading the reporting from Fallujah of Canadian journalist, Dahr Jamail.

⁹⁹ Jonathan Holmes, 'Fallujah,' <http://www.ica.org.uk/Fallujah%2B13308.twl> accessed July 6, 2007, B.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ While in Fallujah, Jo Wilding was kidnapped by local militia, later to be released. The ambulance she was travelling in was shot at, and she was able to report first-hand the atrocities committed by the occupying forces. After being ejected from the country by the Americans, she collected herself and returned, this time with a circus, Circus2Iraq, in which she performed as a clown. Jo Wilding had already published her own book, *Don't Shoot the Clowns* in 2006 based on her blogs by the time that *Fallujah* was written. This book was adapted into a play in 2010. The play was not critically well received, with *The Guardian* offering that 'while Wilding and her clown troupe come across as admirable, they are also portrayed as irritatingly self-obsessed and unsympathetic'. See: Lyn Gardner, 'Don't Shoot The Clowns Review,' *The Guardian*, 31st October 2010.

¹⁰² Jonathan Holmes, *Fallujah: Descriptive Booklet*, 2007

indiscriminate firepower formed the backbone of the play, along with more poetic inclusions, such as extracts from Eliot Weinberger's, *What I Heard About Iraq* (2006) reworked into 'Scene 16: The Trade Fair. Baghdad'. 'Documentary realism is not possible in this case' Holmes asserted in the play's introduction, 'my feeling is that it would be disingenuous to attempt it. Consequently, my guide was not so much authenticity as authority'.¹⁰³ Thus, we find Jamail transformed into a female journalist called Sasha (played by Harriet Walter), as the 'white-guide' character. The play follows her journey as she encounters witnesses to the siege, before becoming more enmeshed in the lives of the citizens and the aid-workers, until she finds herself reporting from the morgue in the aftermath of the bombing: 'The smell, oh God. But it's the eyes that get me and they won't go away'.¹⁰⁴ This episodic 32-scene play has a verbatim skeleton, but Holmes has reshaped and reworked and reimagined to create scenes that move the historicisation and reportage of documentary to hook *sentience* by affectively vibrating in the present tense.¹⁰⁵ Scene 21 'ATTACK: Fallujah' brings the immediacy of '[e]xcruciating noise' and the 'unbearable' thrumming of munitions.¹⁰⁶ Holmes' scenic and dramaturgic construction stacks the horrors of war as a perimeter fence around the audience, enclosing them in parallel to the besieged city, creating an '*as if*' experience which aims to bring viewers to consciousness about the impacts of war.

Bio-politics and sensory warfare

The United Nations had urged restraint throughout the periods of assault on the city of Fallujah in 2004,¹⁰⁷ with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, calling

¹⁰³ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 147.

¹⁰⁴ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 212.

¹⁰⁵ Accounts are dramatized, writings of Jo are given to Sasha to speak (see Scene 27), friendship bonds are invented, all framed by political speeches intended to ironize the American justification for war.

¹⁰⁶ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 192.

¹⁰⁷ The US media offered broad support to George W. Bush's 'freedom agenda', with the liberal voice of the *New York Times* offering only a muffled note of complaint about the tactics of bloody guerrilla-style warfare;

for assurances from the US-Iraqi coalition the civilians in the city would be safeguarded, warning against, ‘indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, killing of injured persons and the use of human shields’.¹⁰⁸ Predictably, the US Department of State, offered a subdued reporting of the operation in the summary report in the subsequent months after the battle:

Most notable was “Operation Phantom Fury” on Fallujah (November 2004), involving 6,500 U.S. Marines and 2,000 Iraqi troops. U.S. forces captured the city within about ten days, killing an estimated 1,200 insurgents and finding numerous large weapons caches and a possible chemical weapons lab, but most of the guerrillas are believed to have left before the U.S. offensive began.¹⁰⁹

The report omits the brutal human rights abuses in attacking known civilian locations, indiscriminate shooting on sight, use of untargeted weapons and the proliferation of chemical weapons.¹¹⁰ It wasn’t ‘a possible chemical weapons lab’ contributing to generational birth defects in the region but use of skin-melting white phosphorous and other toxic materials, used by the US Army to ‘smoke out’ insurgents, folksily christened as ‘shake and bake’.¹¹¹ Aligning with Agamben’s annulment of political resistance in *Means Without Ends*, in *Fallujah*, Holmes offers a pessimistic biopolitics that emphasises the fragility of survivability and resilience within liminal zones created by ‘state-of-exception’ mechanisms.¹¹² In a work

‘Smashing through the narrow residential streets of Falluja is not the textbook way to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign, where winning hearts and minds is even more important than reasserting control over contested territory’ See: Editorial. *The New York Times*, 10 December 2004.

¹⁰⁸ United Nations, *2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration*, (New York: United Nations, 2006).

¹⁰⁹ Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: U.S. Regime Change Efforts and Post-Saddam Governance*, (Washington DC: The Library of Congress, 2006) 31.

¹¹⁰ The conflict allegedly breached over 70 articles of the Geneva Conventions – including the bombing of hospitals, health centres and schools as well as the use of chemical weapons, the killing of unarmed civilians holding white flags, the prevention of civilians from leaving the city and relief organisations from entering.

¹¹¹ The US Military have maintained that they did not contravene the Geneva Convention Protocols on the use of Chemical weapons, asserting that white phosphorus is a legitimate incendiary weapon working on thermic combustion, and not a substance that extirpates through toxicity. (See: Federation of American Scientists, ‘Biosecurity: Chemical Weapons’. 2010). The semantic sophistry does not deter Holmes who, as part of the full publication of *Fallujah*, systematically enumerates the US ‘riding roughshod’; asserting that ‘One nation forcing its beliefs, economy and political structure upon another by burning sections of its population alive does not sound like democracy’ See: Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq’s Besieged City*. 135.

¹¹² Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 104.

so concerned with the *affects* of biopolitics, it is apt Holmes sought to craft a biopolitical form of immersive theatre.¹¹³ Following assertions about the use of chemical weapons in Fallujah made by journalist, Ben Cubby, Holmes telephoned the munitions factory in Illinois, Rock Island Arsenal, allegedly producing the white-phosphorous, so references in the play would be anchored in fact. In conversation, Holmes vociferously guarded the veracity of the cross-checking and substantiation of his sources in putting together the play text; he described the pathways of his investigation in detail, outlining the two years of desk-research, meetings, conversations, and interviews that formed the play. Holmes' book *Fallujah* was published in 2007; a considerable volume consisting of the background history to the siege of the city, timelines, notes on the Geneva Conventions, excerpts from political speeches, pieces of journalism and commentary, blogposts written at the time of the blockade, and finally the playscript. This is both persuasion and polemic, full of facts, evidence and inside intelligence designed to activate political opposition to the wider concerns of war in Iraq.¹¹⁴ The materiality of the book is a corroborative artefact to the 'authority' of the testimony within the play. Given the melting down of 'fact' through the conflict, Holmes was in pursuit of a validated account of 'Operation Phantom Fury', knowing the history of the siege was a maelstrom of disputation and counterclaims over the sequence of events.¹¹⁵ Holmes anticipated of some of the charges of anti-Americanism that littered the reviews:¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, 16.

¹¹⁴ The book opens with a frontispiece stating, 'Fallujah has become Iraq, and Iraq is now Fallujah', attributed to an unnamed 'Senior Iraqi source'. See: Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*.

¹¹⁵ See: Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin Press, 2006)

¹¹⁶ See Kieron Quirke's review of *Fallujah* for the *Evening Standard* – 'If you don't like the US, you might like Fallujah. Sometimes, this piece of documentary theatre seems more interested in fomenting anti-Americanism than in informing its audience... you can't help but notice that all the American soldiers are idiots, and the few Arabs lovely and reasonable... US claims that insurgents were using civilians as human shields go uninvestigated'. See: Kieron Quirke, 'Fallujah Review,' *The Evening Standard*, May 6, 2007.

Everything had to be verified at least two or three times independently, and if possible, all the big stuff had to be photographic evidence, the standards of evidence had to be really high, because I knew that I was going to get so much flak.¹¹⁷

What Holmes might not have anticipated in the ‘flak’ was receiving death-threats; his own safety was caught up in the playing out of the persistent tensions over the UK’s role in the Iraq War and the allegations of human rights abuses by the British military. The role of the state was emphasised to Holmes.¹¹⁸ Staging *Fallujah* was a ‘subversive’ act.¹¹⁹

The arrival of US military firepower on the streets and in the skies of Fallujah in the form of armoured cars, Humvees, gunships, and bombers, together with the barrage of psychological weapons including smoke bombs, ‘sound bombs’, and propaganda broadcasts, all amounted to a systematic, multi-dimensional assault, not just on the citizens of the Iraqi city, but also on its infrastructure, on the very urban fabric that tenuously held together an already chaotic environment.¹²⁰ This was the theatre of war. All this spectacle, this performed brute force, all this armour and hardware was ironically brought to bear on Fallujah under the guise of state-building, an attempt, as one of the senior American officers quoted by Holmes argued, to ‘make the city liveable’, to ‘clean it out properly’ in preparation for reconstruction.¹²¹ The US siege was therefore, in a sense, an attempt to re-inscribe a city previously characterised by the endogenous script of Islamic insurgency with the exogenous rhetoric of American culture, democracy, free-market capitalism, and the promise of human

¹¹⁷ Holmes, ‘British Library Interview,’ 2010.

¹¹⁸ Tony Blair would complete his stint as the British Prime Minister in the month that Fallujah concluded its London run, in June 2007. Movements to arrest Blair for war crimes were mounting, not least from journalist George Monbiot whose testimony is included in *Fallujah*. Dominic Cavendish writing in *The Telegraph* saw the play Fallujah as a ‘necessary act of collective penance - the first of many? - for our part in a war, even as Tony Blair slinks away from Number 10’. See: Cavendish, ‘On the road: Fallujah,’ 2007.

¹¹⁹ Cyrielle Garson, *Beyond Documentary Realism: Aesthetic Transgressions in British Verbatim Theatre: Aesthetic Transgressions in British Verbatim Theatre* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021) 307.

¹²⁰ This included a sonic ecosphere of heavy metal and Jimi Hendrix blasted from the AC-130 gunships that circled the city, intended to cause alarm and prevent sleep.

¹²¹ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 12.

rights. As Finburgh Delijani notes, '[w]ars, when reported, tend to be reshaped into spectacles that serve to advance the ideologies of the state or the military', where state actors are deployed to reinforce dogma, 'war's main players – armies – are themselves always and already reinforced by spectacle'.¹²² In his creative reassembly of Fallujah, Holmes attempts to immerse the audience in a spectacularised version of the spectacle of war, urging *sentience* through bombarding the watchers with explosive noises, uncanny soundscapes, light surges, swivelling locations, and jarring images on vast video-screens around the playing space – reproducing, repeating, reanimating the sensory brutalities of war.¹²³ I now turn to question whether the æffect of his spectacular *mise-en-scène* allows consciousness to be raised.

Theatres of War

In *Fallujah*, we see the systematic re-production of conflict imagery through film screens, the constant presence of rolling news, the duplication or ventriloquism of real-life people (the aid-workers but also figures such as Condoleeza Rice), a looping soundtrack, as well as the Ortas' persistently reiterative stage installations. The Ortas' design incorporates a battalion of near-identical hazard suits/uniform(s) – each with minor, fingerprint differences— a profusion of body-bags, metal boxes, piles of gloves, shoes. Just as in *Katrina*, the locations are reproduced, and the site is doubled before-and-after the storm. I argue this doubling encourages us to deconstruct the constituent parts of the arranged theatrical location as we first experience the place and then witness its de-construction; thus, the degradation of place is an intrinsic part of the internal machinery of the play's form and symbolism. Holmes' work

¹²² Finburgh Delijani, *Watching War on the Twenty-First Century Stage: Spectacles of Conflict*, 65.

¹²³ In the case of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, this destructive human intervention included the heavily militarised and discriminatory disaster management of FEMA and other Federal bodies. In Holmes' design for the Bargehouse production—we witness the spectacle of a city doubly assaulted, first by natural devastation and subsequently by uniformed state mismanagement.

emphasises duplication and repetition as preparatory methods for the capitalist consumption and colonisation that accelerate human rights disasters. Audiences are prompted to attention over the nature of repetition, uniformity, and multiplicity in the realm of warfare, and how such uniformity assists the state in the project of dehumanisation and objectification as vital preparations for the act of extermination and genocide.¹²⁴ In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière cautions there should be no conflation of the idea of spectacle with apolitical anaesthesia, urging us instead to re-examine the set of ‘equivalences and oppositions’ underpinning the political possibilities contained within the interwoven form of the synthetic theatre event.¹²⁵ Holmes’ plays are constructed through an amalgamation of borrowed accounts, reassembled documentation, broadcast news reports, photographs, texts, and images already effectively rendered as simulacra through their media reproduction, accelerating ‘this viral contamination of things by images’.¹²⁶ I argue here Holmes highlights the strategic use of simulacrum in the disaster moment and its routine deployment to usher in hegemonic ideology. For Jean Baudrillard the ‘simulacrum’ is a manifestation of hyper-reality, the assumption of the reproducibility of everything and intimate knowledge of nothing, representation degraded through multiple mediations and interceding framings. I gesture towards Baudrillard’s intervention in the graded opposition between ‘real’ and ‘simulated’ is in dialogue with the real/unreal duality of the theatre event. The interplay between these two values can stimulate thought and action in the viewer as they negotiate the space between the constructed fiction of the text and the experiential ‘hyper-reality’ of the immersive embodied act of congregation within the presence of co-witnesses who act as a

¹²⁴ We can perhaps also consider how the original intention to costume the audience in ‘uniform’ rain-ponchos in the play *Katrina*, creates a repetition of a visual sign, both anonymising and drawing attention to the very presence of multiples. This has an interesting connection to the perception and subsequent reception of the US National Guard in New Orleans after the hurricane, their uniform becoming an agent provocateur in its licence to abrogate personal responsibility.

¹²⁵ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 6.

¹²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12.

cue to recall the social context and affective consequence of shared humanity.¹²⁷ Following Baudrillard, an audience will make contact with this approximation, precisely because it is known through the simulation of the event already encountered through mediated spectacle. The theatrical version of the event becomes a temporary reality precisely because our communal concurrence accepts and shores up the simulacra. Activating Baudrillard, Finburgh Delijani cautions that ‘fascination’ with spectacles of the hyperreal makes political engagement fragile:

...war can be mediated into a spectacle that maintains us at a comfortable distance from its atrocities and complexities, while arousing just enough ‘curiosity’ to sustain our interest and our consumption [...] the trouble with curiosity, as Baudrillard warns, is that it is not an intense enough emotion to engage commitment or responsibility.¹²⁸

Indeed, in our interview, Holmes reflected that for some of his audience the recreated world of his play became ‘too much of a game’, where the aesthetic environment would cause them to ‘lose concentration’ and ‘stop listening’ to the valued testimonial accounts¹²⁹. This draws me back to Adorno’s thoughts espoused in the Introduction around the ‘industrial’ consumption of culture which he advances as ‘anti-enlightenment’, and as ‘mass deception’, which is, ‘turned into a means for fettering consciousness’.¹³⁰ Holmes acknowledges the processual discovery format of his plays created an impatience with the politicised speeches.¹³¹ Like several makers using multimedia, recorded footage, and broadcast reports

¹²⁷ Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 28.

¹²⁸ Finburgh Delijani, *Watching War on the Twenty-First Century Stage: Spectacles of Conflict*, 34.

¹²⁹ Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010. However, his part in advising on the site-specific verbatim dramaturgy of *The Mill – City of Dreams* would appear to have assuaged some of those production difficulties, the play garnering both a warm response to the conception of the project and positive reviews for the ambience and the seeming synergy between place and content. Even Dominic Cavendish of *The Telegraph*, who has expressed a wearied irritation with Holmes’ previous theatrical outings, gave *The Mill* an excellent notice: ‘is beautifully presented throughout, this promenade show is far more than a nostalgic exercise. It asks, pertinently, where this country is going next.’ See: Dominic Cavendish, ‘The Mill: City of Dreams, Drummonds Mill, Bradford, review,’ *The Telegraph*, 6 April 2011.

¹³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Culture industry reconsidered,’ *New German Critique* (1975) 18-19.

¹³¹ Elsewhere Holmes aligns the journey format of the immersive promenade form computer-gaming, emphasising that ‘promenade work... is something that young audiences, even those new to theatre, are often

to convey specific political messages alongside live performance, I contend Holmes was paradigmatically and practically torn in the negotiation between the interactive and the distractive. Moreover, Holmes emphasises the liveness of theatre as the foremost mechanism to invoke political change in the audience, from passive viewers to active witnesses; ‘the more we encounter something vicariously through various media, the more we get used to that, and the more we take that for granted as the norm, the more I think we respond well to live situations where that is not present’.¹³²

Holmes repeatedly refers to the creation of the ‘spectacular’ mise-en-scène for *Fallujah* as ‘collaborative’ and to Jericho House’s maxim as ‘cross-disciplinary’.¹³³ ‘The idea behind it’, Holmes explained in interview, ‘was that we were producing three strands of representation of that situation, married in performance but could almost stand alone in themselves. So, the set was an installation artwork, not a theatre design’.¹³⁴ Holmes asserts the synergetic scenography and soundscapes of his work are intended to leave the audience ‘enveloped in the most immersive of visual and aural designs’ but as he conceded, the artworks formed more of an inviolable backdrop, than part of the enveloping experience.¹³⁵ This performance ‘installation’ was resituating artworks with a pre-existing identity and purpose, imbued with the political capital accrued from previous exhibition,¹³⁶ but also

more comfortable with because interactivity and progression-based entertainment is already familiar to them from gaming. See: Holmes, Interview 2, 2011.

¹³² Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010.

¹³³ Holmes, ‘Fallujah,’ 2007. B.

¹³⁴ Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010.

¹³⁵ Jonathan Holmes The Mill Team: The Mill - City of Dreams, <http://www.themill-cityofdreams.com/people/the-mill-team/> accessed March 20, 2011.

¹³⁶ The artists responsible for the scenic design of *Fallujah*, Lucy+Jorge Orta had already made numerous large-scale installation art works and performance installations, reframing and refracting images of conflict in their ‘Portable Protests’ sequence, which began with a work entitled ‘Fallujah-Casey’s Pawns’ that premiered in 2004 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The same gold-foil silkscreen printed military combat suits formed the basis of the art installation for Holmes’ *Fallujah* in 2007; a further six pieces were made especially—incorporating the artists’ preoccupations with ‘staging the social bond’ (See: Roberto Pinto et al. *Lucy Orta* (London: Phaidon, 2003). 5)—for the performance at the Old Truman Brewery. These were joined with several other pieces of art by the Ortas which had already debuted at various European art galleries.

meaning the rarefied objects were reluctant to be *at play* within the immersive experience. As Holmes recalled: ‘you couldn’t be as pliable with it as you could with a theatre set, so the actors were quite ginger around it, reluctant to touch it because it was an installation, a very, very valuable artwork in its own right’.¹³⁷ The problems with the collaboration did not just reside with the ‘look-but-don’t-touch’ set, the intended ‘near constant’ score by award-winning composer Nitin Sawney, ‘to encourage the audience to empathize with the predicament of those trapped in Fallujah’ was also dampened during the run after complaints from the audience that the dialogue was inaudible.¹³⁸ The involvedness and deliberate frenzy of the step-inside world created by Holmes meant the very human rights abuses he wanted to amplify became diffused and confused to his audiences. The affective powers of Holmes’ work are strong, but in the melange dramaturgy the human-scale of testimony struggles for space.

In the published reviews and responses to Holmes’ play, there was consensus the events of Fallujah remained of political urgency: Susannah Clapp, writing in *The Observer*, echoed Lynn Gardner’s comments in *The Guardian* – the play leaving Gardner ‘feeling morally outraged’¹³⁹ – when she asserted the events of the US offensive, ‘deserves to be recorded’.¹⁴⁰ *The Sunday Times* correspondent John Peters called it, ‘a moral tonic for the conscience’,¹⁴¹ with Philip Fisher forecasting the play might ‘accelerate the end of a not-war that continues to claim lives on a daily basis’.¹⁴² However, nearly all agreed the staging of the play was frustrating, detrimental to the text and its intended political impact. Benedict Nightingale of *The Times* described the event as ‘less of a play, and more a tribunal

¹³⁷ Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010.

¹³⁸ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 144

¹³⁹ Lyn Gardner, ‘Fallujah Review,’ *The Guardian*, May 7, 2007.

¹⁴⁰ Susanna Clap, ‘A triumph in cardboard,’ *The Observer*, May 13, 2007.

¹⁴¹ John Peters, ‘Fallujah Review,’ *The Sunday Times*, May 12, 2007.

¹⁴² Fisher, ‘Fallujah Review,’ 2007.

vivant',¹⁴³ with Cavendish witheringly opining that Holmes' staging was, 'a bit too chic for its own good', and whilst Cavendish saluted 'the attempts to simulate aerial bombardment, the effect is more like being at a rave than under siege'.¹⁴⁴ Holmes had attempted to, sensually and somatically, reanimate the disaster moment to highlight atrocity, but in doing so had emphasised the deficiency of simulacra to stand in for the event. There was a shared opinion amongst reviewers that the jumbled and crowded *mise-en-scène* had 'taken the drama out of a crisis'.¹⁴⁵ Holmes' stage directions indicate that 'we run the gamut of bombardment' and experience 'disorientation', using bodily disruption and the fear stimulus to provoke *sentient* response,¹⁴⁶ but for Gardner, 'the disorientating use of noise and music is a manipulation too far', seeing a piece 'whose execution robs it of authority'.¹⁴⁷ For these critics the *affective* elements were problematic: the sightlines were awkward; the flow of the promenade was under-developed; the soundscape overwhelming; and the installation art provided as stage scenery was a psychic interruption to the concentration on, and engagement with, the testimonies – where they decided the real *effect* of the play resided. As Young recalled from his watching of the production, 'the awkwardness of the space and the *mise-en-scène* [...] compromised the aims of implicating the spectators viscerally and of encouraging them to empathize with those trapped in the Iraqi city'.¹⁴⁸ Discontented and dissatisfied reviewers acknowledged the play's ambition but critiqued the theatrical technique. Peters concluded that 'the problem is the production. This is a tricky subject for promenade theatre.

¹⁴³ Benedict Nightingale, 'Fallujah Review,' *The Times*, May 5, 2007.

¹⁴⁴ Dominic Cavendish, 'On the road: Fallujah,' *The Telegraph*, May 5, 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Clapp, 'A triumph in cardboard.'

¹⁴⁶ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*. 193.

¹⁴⁷ Gardner, 'Fallujah Review.'

Gardner was to elaborate on this theme in (and Holmes was not her only target) her think-piece 'Does verbatim theatre still talk the talk': 'At the Old Truman Brewery, Fallujah tries to meld two theatrical fashions - site-sympathetic and verbatim techniques - and fails dismally on both scores. However noble its intentions, it is unsatisfactory as theatre and ineffective as politics. It's inadequately staged and will only ever confirm what most of us already largely think and know, allowing us to pat ourselves on the back for thinking and knowing it'. See: Lyn Gardner, 'Does Verbatim Still Talk the Talk,' *The Guardian*, 07 May 2007.

¹⁴⁸ Stuart Young, 'Playing with Documentary Theatre: Aalst and Taking Care of Baby', *New Theatre Quarterly* (2009) 74.

You keep losing your focus... You leave shocked and angry, yes, but not involved enough'.¹⁴⁹ In recreating the disaster situation in his human rights theatre, Holmes had emphasised the deficiency and ephemerality of his simulation to stand in for the human rights abuses and horrors of warfare. His ethical purpose of bringing an audience to consciousness about the war was compromised in conflicting dramaturgy that diminished the 'authority' he was seeking.¹⁵⁰ I now return to an analysis of *Katrina* to explore the polysemy of the 'text' of the mise-en-scene and the multiple modes of political provocation in the plays.

Making spaces for human rights

Holmes' productions invite audiences to explore and experience the ways in which disorder and dysfunction serve to disrupt the 'legible' codes and networks of the 'social elements of citizenship' upon which human rights flourish.¹⁵¹ Both *Fallujah* and *Katrina* enact a formal trajectory from recognisable order to disorder, 'sensible' gathering phases give way to sensual immersions that usher in human chaos, concluding with the altered reality of life 'after the flood'. In these stricken cities, the exercise of power, and 'performances' of disaster, survival, emergency management, military siege, and armed resistance rendered the urban environments unstable, incomprehensible, 'un-readable', and hostile to their citizenry. The descriptor 'citizen' bleeds away from abject victims of disaster and oppression forced to remain in the terrifying apocalyptic environments of Fallujah and New Orleans, no longer endowed with rights and civic entitlements. The de-formation of place suggests a 'point' at which 'the idea of the urban "text" fail[s] fully to account not only for the multiple, physical, material, and phrenic interactions between city and citizen, but also for the city as a space of

¹⁴⁹ Peters, 'Fallujah Review.'

¹⁵⁰ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*. 147.

¹⁵¹ Michael McKinnie, 'Performing the Civic Transnational: Performance, Governance, and Citizenship,' in *Performance and the City*, ed. D. J. Hopkins et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 123.

tension and negotiation framed in countless ways by formal and informal works of performance'.¹⁵² The geography and topography of these cities are layered into the plays' dramaturgy and mise-en-scène, and the power of the urban environment 'as both crucible of conflict and container of dissent' is vividly present.¹⁵³ In *Fallujah* and *Katrina*, the dense staging is crucial to the audience's appreciation of what makes the city-space uniquely vulnerable to human rights crises when the 'overwhelming force' of authority disrupts the fragile intermeshing of proximity and multiplicity.

The journalist Julian Borger reported on the human rights abuses in the city space of New Orleans in the days after the hurricane struck:

we found groups of bewildered people wading through foetid black waters, looking for food, shelter and help [...] Thousands of survivors, mostly poor and mostly black, ended up huddling in the battered Superdome sports arena and the city convention centre, expecting that the government would soon come to their aid. How wrong they were... There were a handful of police there, but they watched the misery from a distance, holding rifles and pump-action shotguns like prison guards.¹⁵⁴

Holmes' play *Katrina* reports these events in unstinting detail using six interview testimonies. Some of these testimonies are a matter of public record, others were gained by Holmes in interview, all with strong authorial shaping and drenched with references to *The Tempest* and *The Divine Comedy*. The play centres on the character of Beatrice, whose cancer-ridden husband, Virgil, dies thanks to the hurricane's impact on medical oxygen supplies.¹⁵⁵ She determines his body cannot be left to the vagaries of floodwaters, rats, and alligators, and she

¹⁵² D. J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr & Kim Solga, *Performance and the City*, ed. D. J. Hopkins et al., (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 5.

¹⁵³ Michael Keith & Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), 53.

¹⁵⁴ Julian Borger, 'Katrina: the play returns to the eye of the storm,' *The Guardian*, August 30, 2009.

¹⁵⁵ We can note further classical allusions in *Katrina*, despite this being positioned as a work of testimony and drawn from eyewitness accounts, the naming of Virgil and Beatrice allude to Dante's guides through the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and finally through *Paradiso*, from *The Divine Comedy*. This provides a sense of hope with the survivor of the flood, Beatrice, being our primary guide across the floors representing access to the beatific vision.

floats the corpse ('not a toe touched the water in all that time'¹⁵⁶) the five miles from their apartment where he died, to New Orleans City Hall as a last farewell to his beloved 'drowned city'.¹⁵⁷ *Katrina* is structured around a 'passage through' the 'varied ambiances' of the flooded city, with its, 'currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones'.¹⁵⁸ The purposeful drifting of Beatrice through the watery environment of flooded New Orleans contrasts with the stasis of two other plays produced about the events of Hurricane Katrina in that period. Both Beau Willimon's *Lower Ninth* (Trafalgar Studios, 2010), and Lisa Evans' *The Days the Waters Came* (Unicorn Theatre, 2010), focus on the experiences of immobile groups of people stranded on the roofs of houses, surveying the city's devastation from an unsettling new perspective.¹⁵⁹ In contrast, as the flood waters rise in the play *Katrina*, Beatrice's method of navigating and 'reading' the city is forced to change, she must 'get close' to make sense of the streets. Without her glasses, her perception, and physical position in relation to the urban environment is radically recalibrated to the limits of her body as she feels her way. Like that described by Ariel in *The Tempest*, Beatrice has 'suffer[ed] a sea-change', her city transformed into 'something rich and strange'.¹⁶⁰

Voices from the floods

Katrina also recounts the testimony of a prisoner, Cal, breaking out of his cell using a mop-wringer, after he has been left to die by prison guards who abandoned their posts, and of two

¹⁵⁶ Holmes, *Katrina*, 17-18.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 18.

¹⁵⁸ Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive,' *Situationist International Online*, (December 1956)

<https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html> accessed January 10, 2010.

¹⁵⁹ *Lower Ninth* premiered at the Flea Theater, OBNY, February 2008.

¹⁶⁰ The words are Ariel's, and allude to the transformation of Ferdinand's father, Alonso, due to his submersion in the opening shipwreck of *The Tempest*. William Shakespeare, (ed) Anne Richter, *The Tempest*, (London: Penguin, 1986), Act I, Scene ii, 401.

white tourists who build an encampment on the freeway, who are not only threatened by a gun-toting sheriff but see him steal their food and water. Miranda witnesses the police shooting at supermarket looters to claim the food for themselves, and babies floating in the water at the Louisiana Superdome. There are many reminders, too, of government inanity and self-preservation through collaged news reports and interview snippets played between scenes, these hollow, sanctioned lexicons counterpointing the flowing argot of the New Orleans inhabitants. Furthermore, the outpouring in New Orleans of texts of all kinds and registers altered the picture of the city, the slang-heavy defiance of the 9th Ward's beleaguered graffitos came to be known as 'street-blogging'.¹⁶¹ In this textual battle, the disembodied voices of Hurricane Katrina's most impoverished victims struggled to articulate their rage and bitterness at their abandonment by state and US Federal forces by writing directly on the walls, roofs, cars, trees, and any other surface of their city that had not been destroyed by the flood.¹⁶² This politicised text was rewritten on the set of *Katrina*, with Holmes and designer, Lucy Wilkinson giving space to this parallel testimony, and as another incarnation of Holmes' unruly 'carnavalesque' polyphony of text intended to provoke the *sentient* response. The politicised reclamation and reinscription of the walls of New Orleans as platforms for expression and protest after Hurricane Katrina might be seen as a version of the strategy of 'détournement' promoted by the Situationists as 'a way of subverting the logic of the system by using the tools of the system against itself' and as a means of resisting or

¹⁶¹ The phrase is used by Douglas Brinkley in his definitive study, *The Great Deluge* (2006); Brinkley reprints numerous press photographs taken during the aftermath of Katrina of these informal, verbal protests.

¹⁶² This combative street-art (or, as another spray-painted inscription put it, 'toxic art') was captured in all its desperate creativity in news coverage from the city during the crisis and has since been memorialised in photo-essays like Richard Misrach's 'Destroy This Memory' (Aperture, 2010). Perhaps the most iconic of these highly-personalised street-blogs were that of shop-owner Bob Rue who painted his boarded-up shop with: 'DON'T TRY I AM SLEEPING INSIDE WITH A BIG DOG AN UGLY WOMAN TWO SHOTGUNS AND A CLAW HAMMER', and '9/11/05 YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO MISS NEW ORLEANS YALL COME BACK FOR CARNIVAL'. Two elements are worth noting about this example of vernacular protest. For one, it represented an expanding canvas: Rue added new panels of text in response to the events he encountered during his enforced stay in the flooded city. The other is that Rue's sign was removed from its original setting and memorialised for posterity at the so-called 'Newseum' in Washington, DC.

‘critiquing everyday life’ in the ‘society of the spectacle’.¹⁶³ Here I view the work of Holmes at the intersection of the emancipation of the spectator through the radical action of constructed ‘situations’ that interrupt the fabric of the everyday, whilst simultaneously operating within a framework of fetishized spectacle using mediated images to shape group social relations, commenting on, but also circling, the ‘false consciousness of encounter’.¹⁶⁴ Holmes deliberately interlaced his spectacle of the streets of New Orleans with verbatim testimony to engender a move from stimulated *sentience* to political consciousness via a designation to the watcher of involved witness. ‘It transforms the relationship with the audience,’ Holmes relayed to Borger, ‘the sense of witnessing an event is more visceral and more immediate’.¹⁶⁵ I argue it is the hope of Holmes’ human rights theatre that false consciousness is moderated and superseded by the responsibility of witnessing. As Holmes indicates in ‘Theatre and Experience’ published to accompany *Katrina*: ‘It is in the counterpoint of these understandings, the sensory and the perceptual, that the potency of theatrical aesthetics resides’.¹⁶⁶ For Holmes, the ‘potency of theatre lies in this ability both to represent experience and to create it in the bodies and minds of those present. It not only portrays change, it enacts it’.¹⁶⁷ Holmes’ theatre praxis is interested in a deconstruction of the mechanics of theatre to gain affective resonance and stimulate effect to create meaning. Even if it is not always fully realised through production, Holmes’ human rights theatre hypothesises that sensual closeness impacts upon sensibility, that in proximity there is

¹⁶³ Carl Lavery ‘Situationism’ in *Performance and the Contemporary City*, ed. Nicholas Whybrow, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 92.

¹⁶⁴ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Blue, 1984), 80

Debord argues that ‘every hour of daily life subjected to the spectacle; this must be understood as a systematic organization of the “failure of the faculty of encounter” and as its replacement by a hallucinatory social fact: the false consciousness of encounter, the “illusion of encounter.” In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, every individual becomes unable to recognize his own reality.’ See: Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1984, 217.

¹⁶⁵ Borger, ‘Katrina: the play returns to the eye of the storm,’ 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Holmes, *Katrina*, introduction.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

permeability. I now close this section by evaluating the æfficacy of Holmes' work on *Katrina* to conclude my examination of the human rights theatre of Jericho House.

Pathologies of immersive performance

Holmes asserted in the production notes for *Fallujah*: 'the audience perspective is constantly shifting. The audience should feel very much involved in the action'.¹⁶⁸ This was further developed in the production of *Katrina*, where the audience are characterised within the drama, not masked with roguish concealment as in some immersive dramas, but cast as professional witnesses, straitlaced auditors surveying the post-hurricane damage. These are witnesses intended as reciprocally visible and meaningful to the testifying characters. *Katrina* opens with the stage-direction: 'The audience arrives at the venue and is told to wait outside until the stroke of eight p.m. Auditors are given disposable rain coverings, such as Americans wear in Scotland, though these should be black rather than the usual transparent plastic'.¹⁶⁹ In the published version of the play, Holmes envisages the 'character' of the audience transposes from impersonal auditors, dispassionately mapping the pre-and-post hurricane landscape to account for damage, through the process becoming 'witness to a form of public hearing of untold stories'.¹⁷⁰ Further transforming to engaged and sympathetic funeral-goers at the burial of Virgil: 'the spectators, therefore, automatically become mourners at a funeral, their own black waterproofs acting as mourning gear'.¹⁷¹ Noticeably, Holmes uses the word 'automatically', but I argue the transformation of audience as co-condoler, converted through the course of the performance event, must navigate several dramaturgical and promenade assumptions and pathologies. This intention to give the audience both a designation as

¹⁶⁸ Holmes, *Fallujah: Eyewitness Testimony from Iraq's Besieged City*, 148.

¹⁶⁹ Holmes, *Katrina*, 9.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Introduction.

¹⁷¹ Holmes, *Katrina*, 44.

investigator-cum-mourner, and a sensual experience through costuming, was dismissed after the previews; the technical practicality of a hundred people wrestling and rustling in their plastic rain-ponchos (that were clear-coloured in the end), was seen to be a distraction, and scrapped just after the opening. Whilst much of this chapter is a recognition of the challenges to making holistic experiential theatre work, I argue here that competition in the aesthetic elements contributing to the *mise-en-scène* can be experienced as jarring to audiences acting as ethicised witnesses, disruptions which might be productive in radical thinking and action in other performance forms, but which causes consciousness of the human rights messages to falter.

‘I find that this particular kind of let’s-all-go-on-a-journey experience affords little illumination’ opined Michael Billington in his tome, *State of the Nation*, ‘although supposedly appealing to our sense of adventure, what it really offers is infantile shock and sensation for jaded theatrical appetites’.¹⁷² Billington is largely deaf to the sirens’ call of experiential theatre, instead lauding the legibility of social realism, when the appeal of immersive theatre is ‘almost entirely sensory: it leaves the heart and mind untouched’.¹⁷³ Whilst this chapter firmly rejects walls between the ‘sensory’ and the ‘heart and mind’, this critique points towards experience of truncated dramaturgy and poor control of form where the connection between sensation and *sentience* has not been allowed to fully develop. I further argue site-specific and promenade performances offer prospects for (physical) deviancies when the text requires careful exploration and conscious consideration - when the unplanned might shatter the coherence and force of the planned material. In *Fallujah*, many of the disenchanted reviewer comments were directed against unsatisfying curation of the

¹⁷² Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 397.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

scenic and sensory elements, and on one evening when I saw the performance, some frustrated audience members, bored of craning their necks and standing on their tiptoes, sat down in one spot and ceased any attempt to watch the piece. In *Katrina* such issues had been mostly mitigated, however, the careful configuration of a New Orleans funeral at the climax of the play was still punctured by the clumping arrival of flustered stragglers struggling to ascend the narrow staircase into the final performance space. *The Londonist* noted there was ‘much awkward shuffling and loitering, dissipating any anger, indignation and urgency built up in the long scenes’, describing the physical transferences as ‘anti-climactic’.¹⁷⁴ I demonstrate here a paradox brought into focus by site-specific work when the tools and trappings employed to create an immersive experience begin to compete for attention with the spontaneous aspects of the live performance event. The unpredictable always leaks into the predictable, with detour and drift. These are not ludic or liminal encounters but rather intrusive interruptions pulling us sharply away from the besieged Fallujah hospital, or the ‘Funky Butt’ bar in New Orleans, and back into the warehouse space with its hazard signs, black and yellow safety-tape, and ear-pieced ushers with their obligatory torches. The desire to surround, envelope with the sensory experience that will stimulate intimacy with the ‘reality’ of the evoked world, and thus activate *sentience* in implicated witnesses or provoke political consciousness, encounters an audience who haven’t been rehearsed. Thus, I argue the cracks between worlds highlight the workings of the machine, pulling us out of the sensory experience that is designed to lead us towards consciousness and activation in our wider worlds.

¹⁷⁴ Hazel Tsoi-Wiles, ‘Theatre Review: Katrina @ The Bargehouse,’ September 10, 2009, accessed January 1 2010, https://londonist.com/2009/09/theatre_review_katrina_the_bargehouse

A recurrent leitmotif in press response to the work of Jericho House is of a ‘power that is vitiated’ by the aesthetic and dramaturgical construction of the immersive event.¹⁷⁵ ‘The next “storey” of this four-tier event is surprisingly static’, Hitchings announced in his post show report, ‘Katrina may be labelled a promenade production, but it is not exactly walkabout theatre’.¹⁷⁶ His brisk remarks are characteristic of criticisms of *Katrina*; the piece did not sustain the promenade format, or rather, the activity of our movement through the space did not align with the action of the text; Hitchings review comparing the inaction of the testimonial section to the ‘political inertia that exacerbated the catastrophe’.¹⁷⁷ After journeying through the tourist information office, through the ‘shotgun house’ and up into the Funky Butt Bar, the audience then move into the ‘principal performance space’ which is ‘recognisable’ as the same bar, ‘but now wrecked by wind and water’.¹⁷⁸ The audience were sat (if fleet of foot enough to secure a chair) stationery in a semi-circle for a little over an hour, three-quarters of the total duration of the piece. The personal testimony element – the inducement to a deeper understanding and provocation to the further enquiry that Holmes’ advocates – is played out in a ‘traditional’ actor-audience arrangement. When I asked Holmes why he had restrained the exploratory excitement of the early part of the play, he acknowledged the precariousness and precocities of the form present challenges for audience focus, ‘if you are moving from space to space then I think that there is a risk that you can lose concentration really, so I thought that it was really important to get everyone one in one space for a bit, and really pay attention and then bring the stories to them’.¹⁷⁹ In trying to resolve

¹⁷⁵ Rhoda Koenig, ‘Katrina, The Bargehouse, London,’ *The Independent*, September 9, 2009, 46

¹⁷⁶ Henry Hitchings, ‘Katrina is powerful yet lacks a real sense of urgency,’ *The Evening Standard*, September 6, 2009.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Holmes, *Katrina*, 13. A shotgun house is a narrow house prevalent in African American communities in New Orleans and other areas of the southern United States. According to lore, shotgun houses got their name due to their linear design—theoretically a bullet shot through the front door could exit the back door without hitting anything. Others speculate the word ‘shotgun’ is derived from the Yoruba word ‘togun’, meaning ‘house’ or ‘gathering place’.

¹⁷⁹ Holmes, British Library Interview, 2010.

the staging problems of the testimony in *Fallujah*, Holmes decided to ensure the verbatim narrative of *Katrina* would not be marred by pedestrian pathologies. However, in putting the brakes on the journey format of the play, Holmes creates jolting discontinuities and displays distrust in his announced concept framework endorsed in the prefacing ‘Theatre and Experience’. I am persuaded when Holmes says that ‘such a simple reconfiguration of a medium as this has significant and radical implications’,¹⁸⁰ only it would seem he has fought shy of his own exhortation: ‘In a fully enveloping, four-dimensional space, the opportunities open to [...] expand and deepen almost beyond measure’.¹⁸¹ If this construction, does as Holmes intends, and begins to ‘implicate the spectator’ within the action of the play, then a plurality of political response is unleashed, not just cerebral enquiry but also the activation of a ‘physiological urge towards’.¹⁸² However, this position of bodily engagement as stimulus to deeper critical thought and sinuosity of readings was witheringly dismissed by Dominic Cavendish reviewing *Katrina*, ‘Holmes justifies his approach with a flimsy programme-note: “The more the body is engaged on its own terms with the work, the more those attending are involved, implicated and affected by the experience”. Yeah, right’.¹⁸³ For these reviewers the form was not inherent to the content, and the stasis that hung over the staging of the testimony in *Katrina* – the imprecision and inconsistency in the marriage between text-word and text-environment was sobering, not sensual. This was an incongruity reflected by Theo Bosanquet who felt the ‘sudden introduction of traditionally staged verbatim dialogue into a

¹⁸⁰ Holmes, *Katrina*, Introduction.

¹⁸¹ Holmes, *Katrina*, Introduction.

¹⁸² Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance*, 72.

¹⁸³ Dominic Cavendish, ‘Katrina at The Bargehouse: Review,’ *The Telegraph*, September 9, 2009, accessed January 1, 2010, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/6163204/Katrina-at-The-Bargehouse-review.html>.

In terms of judging the political efficacy of the work, perhaps the opinion of Cavendish is not the benchmark, in one of the most crass comparisons ever to make it past the sub-editor’s watch, he proceeded to make the peevish comparison between his lack of chair for the duration of ‘at least an hour’ (ibid), and the hellish days of misery, fear and deprivation that the citizen of New Orleans suffered in the days, weeks, month following Katrina. Cavendish, however, did claim to be moved by the stories within the play: ‘What emerges forcefully is the grotesque negligence, self-interest and incompetence shown by those charged with securing the situation’ (ibid).

hitherto experiential piece takes some adjustment’, with the verbatim testimonies becoming, ‘rather monotonous, lacking the texture of the impressively designed space in which they’re spoken’.¹⁸⁴ The interventions intended to unsettle and disrupt towards ethico-political action were not fully woven into the fabric. I argue here that Holmes gestured an invitation, brought the audience part way, but the use of form was sporadic. Despite his *belle-lettres* to the contrary in the framing of his work, Holmes’ endeavours to ‘foreground the ethical authority of the artform’, with politically and experientially charged depictions of human rights travesties, did not, develop affective cognisance, did not fully engender *sentience* as entryway to consciousness.¹⁸⁵

It was this sense of disjoin that many critics felt dogged Jericho House’s productions of *Fallujah* and *Katrina*, a feeling that perhaps the company had been seduced by style over substance. In our interview, Holmes’ rebuttal to the negative reviews that *Katrina* received was their failure to engage with the form: ‘People got sort of hung up on the naturalism, or not, of it’ he lamented, ‘which is an understandable response, because we try and immerse people in a world, an event, and we don’t necessarily do that naturalistically’.¹⁸⁶ This feeling was echoed in his analysis of responses to *Fallujah*: ‘I know that some of the audience found it hard because they couldn’t get a particular location of what was happening. The shifts were too episodic’.¹⁸⁷ For Holmes this indicates an audience’s inability to synthesise the disruptions, new dominions, and different rules, but to my mind the evocation of ‘non-naturalism’ and the V-Effekt of episodic dramaturgy also points to the tussle between the over-whelming somatic commitment of immersion, as described in Lambert’s work above,

¹⁸⁴ Theo Bosanquet, ‘Katrina: Reviews’, September 7, 2009, *Whats On Stage*, accessed January 1, 2010, https://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/reviews/katrina_15951.html

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Holmes, British Library Interview. 2010.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

and the political ignition that can come with recognition of the continuities, the historiography of repetitions and consciousness of the wider frame. Despite a *mise-en-scène* that for many refused to coalesce, in attracting significant audience numbers, Holmes had succeeded in using the form of the productions to illuminate occluded aspects of human rights disasters. Both plays received sincere commendation for the specific issues revealed, with Benedict Nightingale praising *Katrina* ‘as riveting an example of site-specific theatre as I’ve seen’ reporting he had been so engrossed in the testimonial revelations, he left ‘the ad-hoc theatre stirred, troubled, but ready for the coda, which is a funeral service that becomes a song of defiance and resilience’, with another reviewer speaking of their indignation of the injustices the production highlighted, ‘a rare and special, site-specific chance for the voices of New Orleans to ring out, raw, angry but unbroken, and at last, to be heard’.¹⁸⁸

Conclusion

Jericho House builds a ‘Theatre of Experience’, animating affective worlds and sculpting sensate responses to convert audience members into ethical witnesses. The human rights theatre of Jericho House, like that of Badac, places the audience within the wreck of the disaster setting, dramatising the rupture of human loss and state duplicity, and orchestrating a dense theatrical and aesthetic vocabulary to generate *æffect*. Jericho House is a maker of odysseys, psycho/somatic journeys that follow the unravelling of fellow human beings. Whilst Holmes does not use corporeality to generate the contagion of fear in his audiences, he creates sonic assaults, disruption, and disorientation to transmit the *as-if* world of the crisis. Holmes regularly reconfigures normative staging to actively remove boundaries between the actor and audience, searching for the radical potential of an intense and dynamic

¹⁸⁸ Tsoi-Wiles, ‘Theatre Review: Katrina @ The Bargehouse,’ 2009.

sentience released through being within the world of the play. These worlds created by Jericho House are layered with multiple modes of storytelling, where first-person testimonies are re-sited in duplicated environments to report back from the catastrophe. However, the ‘carnival’ Jericho House sets in play can be seen to overwhelm the subtleties and details of these personal narratives, and though Holmes baulked at the ‘reading’ style of testimonial performance, his was drowned out amongst his flood restaging. The intention of his human rights theatre was to activate a group of involved witnesses, indignant and politicised, but the fracture of his dramaturgy problematised the development of a collective consciousness. In the final chapter I now turn to human rights theatre using participatory modes to develop community responses.

Chapter Three - Embodied and Embedded rights

Participation in ACT NOW and The Black Men's Consortium

Introduction

This chapter concludes my investigation into 'human rights theatre' and into companies using human rights issues to make drama, here alighting on examples of those adopting rights-based approaches as part of an empowered praxis. This chapter is constructed around two case-studies: one focused on the young people's theatre project ACT NOW, run by Cardboard Citizens, and the second framed around practitioner Tony Cealy and the Black Men's Consortium (BMC). Both case studies foreground economic, social, and cultural human rights, looking at the way in which cultural participation programmes are designed to both embed and embody rights through developing increased agency. The methodology of this chapter continues in the vein of those that precede it, combining ethnographic study, sustained observation, and original interviews. Exploring participation in this section, I write with a recognition that I am not a member of the targeted community or stakeholder group (nor do I always belong to the intended audience), especially in matters of ethnicity and race, and therefore Chapter Three also closes the circle on the ethnographic positionality of my writing throughout the thesis. As in Chapters One and Two, the case-studies in Chapter Three span a period from the advent of the UK Human Rights Act to the present day. This chapter continues the methodology of capturing the tensions of a moment when work was being made, while also offering reflection on the changes to beliefs and behaviours, identifying how developing policy and legislation is impacting the lives of the participants and their access to artmaking.

This section counterposes the missionary objective of the work against the pursuit of ‘artistic product’ and – as in Chapter One on testimonial theatre – considers the valorisation of autobiographical material when working with vulnerable communities. I examine these community performance outputs against James Thompson’s calls for more prevalence to be given to affective response in work that has hitherto prioritised effect. Following my pursuit of affect in human rights theatre, I adopt Thompson’s argument for radical transcendentalism where beauty and pleasure reflect the reclamation of a right to culture and are themselves ‘acts of resistance and redistribution, made in an intimate and sensory key’.¹ In the two case-studies, I chart the different practices available to a large organisation and a solo theatre-maker, and the divergences between corporately-approved practice and the adaptability of an independent artist. There is ‘participation’ to be found in all three case-studies, but in this focus on facilitated events where individuals arrive as active participants, I perceive a shift in ethical positioning not prioritised in the previous case-studies. Readers of Chapter Three will note a shift from the earlier lexicon of testimony, through immersivity, to one of participation, community, and the physicality of being among. This chapter begins from an understanding of audience participation as a spectrum of ‘playing actively’,² ultimately leading to the construction of what Boal termed the ‘spect-actor’ – the substitution of the actor on stage by the audience-participant. This chapter argues for participatory theatre as a rights-building form, where *sentience* as a psycho-somatic experience offers a felt-

¹ James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 11.

² In this chapter I use both the act of participation of individuals within a process of drama-making, aligning to traditional applied theatre conceptualisations, and also Gareth White’s conception of the participation of audience members as ‘the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of a performance’ where an audience is in the process of ‘becoming part of [the] action’. See Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4-5.

understanding of the rights of others, and where stories of others' lived experience ignite *consciousness* and the recognition of human rights as a transnational project.

This chapter further develops the idea of consciousness as the product of human rights theatre, this time using the lens of collective-consciousness – returning to Emile Durkheim's relational understanding of individual action as helixed into an animate social and moral system with the ability to ignite solidarity³– to describe the activity of using participatory theatre as community-building, collaborative practice that are prone to produce a set of shared beliefs around a particular rights-based issue. To further my argument, I hold Gramsci's conception that collective consciousness represents the filaments that unite those oppressed by the ruling ideas and practices in a hegemonic society. Gramsci posited the unified collective would occupy different forms of consciousness, but that collectivity would draw together the intersubjective position from individual experiences of oppression, applying the Marxist form of class struggle to cultural contexts to reach a 'solidarity of interests'.⁴ This, in turn, is redolent of Augusto Boal's enjoinder to work from a position of 'solidarity'. The character of collective consciousness varies depending on the mnemonic encoding used within a group. 'Collective memory', Nicholson asserts, builds a shared identity where the theatre-making 'process of embodying and sharing memories can create the conditions for new ways of thinking and feeling'.⁵ I also want to seed the idea of the collective **unconscious** in the chapter, noting Jung's conception of a shared imaginarium to characterise the theatre pieces made through the hive mind. Evocation of the collective unconscious asks what recurrent images and perspectives surface in the telling of 'shared

³ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 2014), 63.

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2005), 181.

⁵ Helen Nicholson, 'Re-locating Memory: Performance, reminiscence and communities of diaspora,' in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, edited by Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 268.

stories’? I am interested here in how these conceptions of community typology influence the work of theatre companies and practitioners and enhance a communal reception. If—as I have already suggested elsewhere in this thesis—the act of performance threatens to make cultural product of human rights abuse; then how might participatory theatre make an ethical intervention? Can collective aesthetic acts begin to enable the consciousness necessary for human rights redress? What form(s) should the ‘collective’ take?

One of the central points of investigation in this chapter engages with the work and rights-based discourse of Augusto Boal. Both case-studies investigate practice underpinned by Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques which aim to be ‘an agent of change’ and to ‘engage communities in democratic dialogues’ through the participatory and embodied politics of Forum Theatre.⁶ In examining two companies using Forum Theatre as an embodied ‘rehearsal for revolution’, I further chart the interplay between effect and affect towards the æffect amalgamation that has the potential to evoke *sentience*.⁷ This chapter looks at the legacy of Boal and how his practice has shaped the cultural expression of human rights discourse and access to rights. Not only did Boal play a direct role in shaping the artistic philosophy of Cardboard Citizens and the methodology of Tony Cealy, but his work has often led the conversation in Applied Theatre interventions around what might be a ‘liberatory philosophy’ of participatory practice. I will discuss below how TO mechanisms paradoxically present complicated obligations for the oppressed subjects, making them complicit with the illusion that these are matters which oppressed people can fully control within their space. Here, I’m also mindful of the discussion around the colonial cannibalisation of process from the global south and note that TO is a system born in the

⁶ Adrian Jackson, ‘Interview with Adrian Jackson – Cardboard Citizens: by Ancey Lax,’ 26 July, 2011.

⁷ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by Charles A. McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 98.

struggle against the colonisation of South America and honed through collaboration with indigenous peoples. This chapter is also alert to the political problems inherent in the export of Boal's system back to the global south, repackaged by European practitioners. In this seam, Paulo Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness* has contributed to the argument in this chapter, drawing on 'conscientization' as the ability to comprehend the structures of power in order to change them.⁸ As I note in the Introduction, critical consciousness, according to Freire, is the awakening to internalised oppression and the systemic violences supported by denial of social and cultural rights. I pay attention to different formulations of collective consciousness as realised through these theatre events, and the potential for transnational solidarity to be located in an 'Aesthetics of the Oppressed'.

Reading Boal through the decades of his career means encountering a progressive set of new convictions that can confound previously held certainties. There are many theorists who point to the mythmaking around the man; however, I also want to note the shifts and progression within TO as analogous to wider social and political developments. For Latin American theorist Silvia Pellarolo, Boal's reconstructed praxis is a necessary response to the changes in socio-political structures caused by globalisation and the permeation of late capitalism to every outcrop, blurring the lines between First and Third worlds, so that 'the concept of a class struggle, and belief in its possibility, have been destabilised within both contexts'.⁹ I make connections in the bifurcation of Boal's TO system between therapeutic and political, between internal and external, psychic and physical, sensate and material, and with the codified distinctions in human rights between the Economic Social and Cultural group (ESCR) and the Civil and Political group of rights (CPR). The monitoring,

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum International, 2005), 12.

⁹ Frances Babbage, *Augusto Boal* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 25.

enforcement, and implementation framework for ESCRs is a more tepid concern in the international community than upholding CPRs, and, despite claims to the indivisibility of the human rights panoply, there is implicit acceptance that some rights are more important than others.¹⁰ The binarization of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ rights is problematic, and the persistent intertwining between the two groups in human rights discourse echoes Freire’s position: that the lack of multiple modes of capital restricts the ability to assert CPRs. This gap between human being and legal person, as claimer of rights, or as rights-conferred subject, parallels other structural inequalities, operating as a bellwether for political enfranchisement.¹¹ Our political consciousness is awakened through understanding ourselves as human beings. Lawrence Friedman echoes this sentiment, arguing that poverty is not just an absence of necessities like food, shelter, healthcare, but also an accumulative effect where subjects cannot ‘develop themselves to the fullest. And this, of course, violates the fundamental premise of the human rights movement’.¹² Looking at the ways in which participatory forms of theatre have been used to explore and articulate human rights concerns in this chapter, I repeatedly encounter the search for positive rights, the ESCR group. From exploring documentary forms and testimony in Chapter One, we see a weighting towards narratives of displacement, refuge and asylum seeking, border disputes, and the denial of physical liberty. From examining immersive forms in Chapter Two, we are taken to battlefields internment camps, prisons, and atrocity exhibitions: scenes that might be corrected through recourse to

¹⁰ While immediate fulfilment may not be possible due to the economic situation of a country, postponement of proactive action is not permitted. State parties must show genuine efforts to secure the economic, social, and cultural rights enshrined in the ICESCR. The burden of proof for progressive action is considered to lie with the ruling state. The prohibition on discrimination in relation to economic, social, and cultural rights is regarded as having immediate effect. Several national constitutions recognize economic, social, and cultural rights. The Limburg Principles (1987) have been used extensively in national legal systems as an interpretive tool for establishing violations of economic, social, and cultural rights. The Maastricht Guidelines (1997) build on the Limburg Principles to identify the legal implications of acts and omissions which are violations of economic, social, and cultural rights.

¹¹ Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, ‘Introduction: Aporia and Affirmative Critique,’ *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (Oxford: Routledge 2016) 6.

¹² Lawrence M. Friedman, *The Human Rights Culture: A Study in History and Context* (New Orleans: Quid Pro Books, 2011), 118.

legal justice. Here in Chapter Three, we arrive at work that is arguing for rights to housing, mental health provision; rights not always so visible or easy to claim but essential to dignity. In Chapter Three we find the politics of claiming those ESCRs enacted through the practice of cultural rights. I stress that this is not at the exclusion of using community and participatory work to explore the upholding of CPRs, but rather I argue that there are strong relationships between the *sentience* accrued through participation (and of being a sensitised audience to participatory acts) that sparks political consciousness and builds an activist language to claim economic, social, and cultural rights.

PART ONE: ACT NOW

Introduction

The first part of this chapter will focus on the ACT NOW youth programme of Cardboard Citizens. For over thirty years the company has used theatre as a participatory space in which to articulate issues faced by homeless people.¹ The ACT NOW programme has been active since 2009 and has worked with around a thousand homeless young people. Not all participants stay long in the programme, not all want to perform in a play, but all are given an opportunity to work within a creative space and receive recognition for their artistry and ideas. I shall consider whether active participation – *sentient*, consultative, and self-mobilising – can prove a consciousness-raising tool within theatre practice, especially for younger participants. I argue through the course of this chapter that participating or *playing inside* the theatre event is not only a ‘rehearsal’ for rights claiming, but also the *affect* of embodied participation is the recuperation of human rights for subjects whose corporeal presence has been relegated to the edges. I consider ACT NOW as a community-of-participation, amplifying silenced voices through the collective playing-out of marginalised narratives in performance. As member Serge Gogoia said of his participation in the play, *A Molecular Mass* (2013), ‘ACT NOW has benefitted me in my personal life, given me the confidence, the awareness, it gives you a realisation about life. It’s all homeless people getting together. If you don’t like it, don’t come, but if you do, it’ll open doors for you’.² The

¹ Cardboard Citizens is not alone in using arts-based practice to enable and empower homeless people. Streetwise Opera was founded in 1999 to ‘give homeless and formerly homeless people opportunities to further their personal development through participation in music making of the highest professional quality’. This organisation was founded by Matt Peacock as a material rebuttal of the provocative (and possibly apocryphal) comment from Tory Peer Lord Young, who described the homeless as ‘the sort of people you step over on the way out of the opera’. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jul/02/homeless-performers-royal-opera-house>.

² Cardboard Citizens, ‘ACT NOW presents: A Molecular Mass,’ 18 November (2013), Accessed January 01, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqWs4BK7s48>

participatory act delivers the felt-understanding of *sentience*, not just for others, but also an ‘awareness’ for and about oneself. This chapter continues to build upon my framework of ‘human rights theatre’ and argues the work of ACT NOW can be seen through this lens. The plays examine the interconnected oppressions that emanate from homelessness and social dispossession, highlighting the role of the state in the inadequate protection of young people. The plays portray moral and ethical ruptures through the recounting of personal experiences of homeless and the concomitant prejudices involved; finally, my framework suggests that the plays under discussion seek to have an activist effect on the collective behaviours of the audience, which we find through ACT NOW’s participatory dynamics which use varied methodologies to provoke a distributed *sentient* response amongst the audience. I argue in this chapter that through participatory theatre, and the gaining of collective consciousness, the self comes into consciousness. Mirroring the human rights framework, the individual is recognised through the architecture of dynamic relational structures. I consider the models for participation within the company and analyse Cardboard Citizens’ claims to view participants as decision-making stakeholders and collective community members. I also examine the way their models claim to give participants control over the framing and content of the theatrical product, balanced against the company’s stated belief in the merits of ‘professional’ drama, and the role of an aesthetic framework to contain narratives where autobiographical revelation, as a consciousness of the self, makes the subject vulnerable.

Several ‘community theatre’ and applied theatre companies have programmes for young people that utilise active participation modes, but my focus on Cardboard Citizens and ACT NOW derives from the company’s ties to practitioner, Augusto Boal, and to Forum

Theatre, enabling a dialogue of practice to be extended to the work of Tony Cealy.³ This chapter persistently returns to enactments of Forum Theatre, the Brazilian theatre practitioner's injunction for audience members to intervene directly in the action on stage. Despite the nagging problematics of Forum, I argue for its power as a rights-generating machine. Cardboard Citizens are prominent custodians of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) in the UK. The company's founder, Adrian Jackson, was Boal's English translator, propagator, and friend, and Boalian theory and methodology are embedded throughout the work of the company. There is not the scope in this chapter to detail the history of TO, nor to adequately recognise the contribution of Boal to participatory work and the values of applied theatre; however, in using the arrival of the 'spect-actor' on stage in Forum as one lens, I thread together ideas examined in Chapter One, and through the immersive forms of Chapter 2, of using performance to 'speak on behalf of' human rights holders.

The work of Cardboard Citizens focuses primarily on the interlocking issues of homelessness and social exclusion, and, by extension, experiences of powerlessness and voicelessness: 'I've always been obsessed with trying to separate homelessness from a pathological condition, which is often how it is treated in this country, a sort of character defect', Jackson asserts, highlighting his intention to advance public 'understanding [of homelessness] in the larger matrix of things. We need to try to educate people, because this isn't a well-known human rights story'.⁴ Cardboard Citizens make theatre 'about', 'for', 'with', and 'by' homeless people, often performed by those with direct experience of

³ Throughout the second part of this chapter, I continue the convention of capitalising Forum Theatre to designate the understood operation of the form – adaptations of practice notwithstanding – and then as standard in much writing about Theatre of the Oppressed, I use the lower case 'forum' to denote the participatory section where the 'model' (the play) is re-performed and the audience are invited to intervene to replace an actor on stage in order to attempt a better ending to the scene or resolution to the problem.

⁴ Adrian Jackson, 'Interview with Adrian Jackson – Cardboard Citizens: by Ancey Lax,' 26 July, 2011.

homelessness.⁵ Their work operates at the intersection between creative work and activism, between content that dramatises the thematics of human rights, simultaneously deploying a rights-based methodology in the creation of that work. As Michael Balfour posits, this work is about ‘creating partnerships that build community capacity through aesthetic engagement in theatre’ and reconnecting to ‘processes of critical hope and participatory democracy’.⁶ In this opening section, I discuss homelessness as a specific human rights issue as I analyse the effects of homelessness on young people to understand the context of ACT NOW. I want to highlight how the mobilisation of the language of rights and rights-building capacity by Cardboard Citizens and ACT NOW has an impact upon work conducted with these rights-denied participants.

Homelessness and International Human Rights

I now explore the human rights dimensions of homelessness and consider why the work of Cardboard Citizens is relevant to the research questions addressed in this thesis and its investigation of a human rights theatre. This discussion first needs to be located within the relevant UN protocols and conventions, before turning to the UK Human Rights Act and the definition of homelessness expressed in the 1996 UK Housing Act. I consider some of the other available definitions of homelessness, before reflecting on how the challenges of homelessness have a wider impact on civil society, where ‘[t]he ultimate obligation to guarantee the right to housing falls on the state’.⁷ Before examining how younger members are specifically vulnerable to the manifestations and outcomes of homelessness.

⁵ Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009) 10.

⁶ Michael Balfour, *Applied Theatre: Resettlement. Drama, Refugees and Resilience* (London: Methuen Drama, 2015), 8.

⁷ Miloon Kothari, *More than 100 Million Homeless Worldwide*, Interview by Gustavo Capdevilla, Inter Press Service News Agency, 30 March, 2005.

Article 25, clause 1 of the UDHR (1948) begins with the words:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family... and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.⁸

The UDHR's wording was echoed in the assertive language of the UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which entered into force in 1976, and reiterated the State's obligation to make material provision for its people to ensure their physical and mental well-being. The UK was amongst the earliest signatories to ratify the Covenant.⁹ The suite of economic, social, and cultural rights listed in the UDHR and elsewhere are often dismissively characterised as the 'pink' or 'red' rights in contrast to the central group of civil and political rights. However, in practice, as we have seen, CPRs and ESCRs are intimately intertwined: due to their marginal economic and social status, the homeless are effectively excluded from voting or fully participating in the democratic process of this country, and therefore, by definition, the exercise of their civil and political rights.¹⁰

In the UK, where national wealth is higher than most countries within the purview of the UN's Special Rapporteur for Adequate Housing, where housing legislation is more integrated, and support services better resourced, some of the 'poorest and most marginalised sections of society' are nevertheless forced into homelessness.¹¹ Those from the poorest

⁸ UN General Assembly, 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights,' 217 (III) A (Paris, 1948)

⁹ United Nations 'Chapter IV Human Rights: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,' 1976, accessed January 08, 2010.

http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&lang=en&mtdsg_no=IV-3&src=TREATY1

¹⁰ Henry J. Steiner, Philip Alston and Ryan Goodman, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 283.

¹¹ The Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that although there are resource issues in developing countries, significant problems still exist in 'first-world' economies. The Covenant asks the signatory parties to recognise 'The human right to adequate housing, which is thus derived from the right to an

backgrounds and communities,¹² and people with a Black or Black-British background, are still more likely to become, and remain, homeless long-term.¹³ So, to what extent does UK human rights provision engage with homelessness, and what are the legal obligations entailed of the state? As Liverpool-based advisory service, Housing Options, note: the '[UK Human Rights] Act does not give anyone without a home [...] a right to such a home. Those rights [...] come under homelessness and community care legislation'.¹⁴ In this context, the key instrument of homelessness legislation is the major 1996 overhaul of the UK Housing Act where the idea of 'priority need' is removed and the onus for early intervention is placed on Local Authorities. Robust English and Scottish housing laws mean, to date, there are few examples of individuals in the UK drawing directly on national or international human rights legislation.¹⁵ However, campaigners, researchers, and policy makers alike agree the wider human rights framework provides 'an overall coherence to the work of homelessness campaigners',¹⁶ and a narrative to conceptualise and promote a 'rights-based approach' to reformist activism.¹⁷

It is worth pausing to consider more closely the taxonomy of home and homelessness.

The taxonomy of 'home' can be considered as 'possessing three main domains': the physical

adequate standard of living, is of central importance for the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights' See: 'The Right to Adequate Housing,' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021.

¹² Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion, 'European Research Study into Homelessness and Employment: Final report for Off the Streets and into Work. Inclusion research and consultancy,' 2007, 30-36.

¹³ Deborah Quilgars, et al. 'Youth Homelessness in the UK: A Decade of Progress?' (London: Centrepoint, 2008) 50-51.

¹⁴ Housing Options, 'The Human Rights Act and Housing,' *Housing Options*. March 2008.

http://www.housingoptions.org.uk/general_information/gi_quickbriefs/qb_37.pdf, accessed January 08, 2017.

¹⁵ The 2003 Scottish Homelessness Act has been described as 'the closest thing to the practical implementation of the right to housing that the world has ever seen'. See: Donald and Mottershaw, 'Poverty, inequality and human rights,' 2009).

¹⁶ Alice Donald & Elizabeth Mottershaw, 'Poverty, Inequality and Human Rights: Do human rights make a difference?' (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009), 36.

¹⁷ Human rights discourse conceives poverty as multidimensional, encompassing not only a low income but also other forms of deprivation and a loss of dignity and respect. Evoking human rights invites analysis of the structural causes of poverty, rather than only its symptoms, and of the impact of governmental action or inaction on communities experiencing poverty. (Donald & Mottershaw, 'Poverty, Inequality and Human Rights,' 5)

domain of shelter and the power to determine access to that shelter; the social domain where ‘people are able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations’; and the legal domain where the person has a legal entitlement to occupation.¹⁸ By contrast, the European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) often draws a distinction between homelessness and ‘housing exclusion’, the former category encompassing the ‘roofless’ and ‘homeless’, whereas the latter group includes those whose homes are ‘insecure’ or ‘inadequate’.¹⁹ Under their operational definition of homelessness, FEANTSA includes not just those living on the streets, but also those in hostel accommodation, protection shelters, reception centres for asylum-seekers, or those illegally occupying buildings, those under threat of eviction, living in dwellings unfit for habitation, and those living in overcrowded accommodation.²⁰ The structural factors that determine homelessness are ultimately controlled and ameliorated—or not—by the state; homelessness is intrinsically a human rights issue. Researchers in this area argue that poverty should be understood—and addressed—as a ‘multidimensional phenomenon’, which has a ‘process character’ where social exclusion and marginalisation are revealed by the fracture of social relations and personal vulnerabilities.²¹

Routine prejudice and discrimination faced is reported by many of the young homeless people with whom Cardboard Citizens work under their ACT NOW programme.

¹⁸ Deborah Quilgars. et al., ‘Ending Youth Homeless: Possibilities, challenges and practical solutions, Centre for Housing Policy,’ (York: York University Press, 2011), 14.

¹⁹ Bill Edgar, et al., ‘Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level,’ (European Commission: Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, European Communities, 2007), 58-60.

²⁰ Henk Meert et al. ‘The changing profiles of homeless people: Conflict, rooflessness and the use of public space,’ European Observatory on Homelessness, European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (Brussels: FEANTSA 2006).

The FEANTSA model has been widely exported under the acronym ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. The typology does not recognize the UK statutory definition of homelessness, which has been described by researchers in the field as ‘usefully challenging’ to the understanding of the problem in the UK (See Quilgars, et al., ‘Ending Youth Homeless,’:13.

²¹ See Edgars et al, Quilgars et al, FEANTSA and Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion reports.

Peter Kennedy of St. Mungo's charity stresses that the homeless are not a homogeneous community but instead comprise a range of different individuals many of whom have experienced migration *to* or *within* the UK.²² This, too, aligns with the demographic of young people, those aged 16-24, who access ACT NOW. We can begin to comprehend the extent of the social problem that ACT NOW seeks to address, and the rights issues it raises, when we consider the lives of approximately 120,000 people between the ages of 16 and 24 who access homelessness services every year in the UK.²³ Personal factors still play a critical part in the experience of homelessness, problematising access to support and, ironically, rendering the interim options of hostels and temporary accommodation as sites of risk, and pathways to longer-term marginalisation, according to Quilgars' report.²⁴ The same research team concluded in an earlier report, 'one out of every 100 young people aged 16–24 experiences *some form* of homelessness annually'.²⁵ Of that total, only 5% have experienced sleeping rough; instead, these may be young people placed in temporary accommodation by Local Authorities, or boarding in communal hostels, or 'sofa surfing' with friends, itself a form of 'concealed homelessness'.²⁶ This often correlates with the condition of being NEET—Not in Education, Employment, or Training—an acronym well known to those, like Cardboard Citizens, who work with young people.²⁷ They frequently use the term, especially

²² Peter Kennedy, 'Interview with Peter Kennedy— St Mungo's: by Anney Lax', 26 September 2013.

²³ Elliot Williams-Fletcher & Stacy Wairumbi, 'Beyond the numbers: The scale of youth homelessness in the UK, Research Report,' (London: Centrepoint, 2020).

Research has shown an over-representation of Black, young people in hostels, many of whom record a more troubled experience within the homelessness system. See: Ravinder Barn, 'Black Youth on the Margins: A research review,' (York: The Joseph Rowntree Trust, 2001). Excepting London, where refugee communities also weight the numbers, ethnic minority young people are in fact under-represented nationally, when compared to overall population figures. (Quilgars & al., 'Youth homelessness in the UK: A decade of progress?,' 2008)

²⁴ Deborah Quilgars. et al., 'Ending Youth Homeless,' 25.

²⁵ Ibid. 2.

²⁶ Williams-Fletcher & Wairumbi, 'Caught by the Act: the scale of youth homelessness in the UK,' 2020.

²⁷ The category of NEET was previously known as 'status zero', a term which referred to 'a group of people who were not covered by any of the main categories of labour market status (employment, education, or training)' See: Andy Furlong, 'Not a Very NEET Solution: Representing Problematic Labour Market Transitions among Early School-Leavers.' *Work, Employment and Society* 20, no. 3 (September 2006): 553–69.). Critics argued that this terminology effectively quarantined an already vulnerable group, defining them as 'statusless' and 'stateless' within their own (civil) society (ibid. pp. 553-554); it was therefore adjusted to a claimed neutral abbreviation 'NEET' during the mid-1990s. The figures for NEETs in the UK fluctuate from

to describe the marginalised sociological status of the participants and reach the target audience of their ACT NOW programme.

As I detail below, ACT NOW was formed by Cardboard Citizens in 2009 to specifically cater for NEETs and young people aged 16-25 with an experience of homelessness. ACT NOW has generated performances of devised scripts by successive companies of young homeless people, assembling a portfolio of eclectic creative work ranging from montage dramas to Forum Theatre, to promenade, to spoken word and music projects, and interactive films. I interviewed Cathy Weatherald, the inaugural ACT NOW Project Manager, who recounted that the scheme was ‘responding to a need’ not met in the existing programme of workshops and performance opportunities for older homeless constituents.²⁸ Many of the challenges younger homeless people face might intersect with those faced by an older community; however, as noted by Quilgar, younger homeless people can experience increased vulnerability to exploitation, a lack of guidance and boundaries from an early age and are thus less well-resourced to manage homelessness. This, combined with a higher rate of sexual abuse and pregnancy, typically makes this particular group difficult to support. However, Weatherald also emphasised their non-entrenchment in a homeless ‘lifestyle’ does create a greater potential for change.²⁹ It is for this reason that ACT NOW—and its engagement with key clusters of human rights related to homelessness, living with dignity, access to state provision and basic living standards—forms the focus of my enquiry in this part of the chapter.

750,000 to 1m, approximately 12%-18% of 16–24-year-olds, according to the Department of Education. See: Jessica Shepherd, *NEET England*. 24 February accessed February 24, 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/feb/24/neets-statistics>

²⁸ Cathy Weatherald, ‘Interview with Cathy Weatherald, ACT NOW Project Coordinator, Interview by Annecy Lax’, 08 September 2011.

²⁹ Quilgars & al., ‘Ending Youth Homeless,’ 2011.

Cardboard Citizens: Making Room for ACT NOW

It was the drive to experiment with the mechanics and efficacy of Forum Theatre, rather than the issue of homelessness *per se* that led to the founding of Cardboard Citizens in 1991.

Adrian Jackson recalls his initial ‘difficulties’ with an earlier reading of Boal’s urtext, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, were annulled when he had the opportunity to attend a workshop with the celebrated practitioner in the late 1980s at the London Bubble Theatre.³⁰ Motivated by ‘trailing Forum Theatre in London’ to ascertain whether the vaunted impacts of Boal’s methodology could gain traction in the UK, Jackson and colleagues drew up a list of ‘the types of “oppressed” people that we might be interested in working with; the list was long: unemployed people, nurses, teachers, people with mental health issues, disabled people, prisoners, youth workers, women, you name it’.³¹ Refuting any grand narratives of predestiny, it was ‘practicalities’ that caused Jackson to settle upon the homeless as the oppressed group, a case of ‘who would be able to take part in such a project, working intensively for some five weeks’ and ‘flyers were distributed around London asking anyone who was homeless or had experienced homelessness to participate in a series of free workshops’.³² This candid anecdote of casting around for an appropriate ‘oppressed’ group to liberate seems somewhat at odds with Jackson’s insistence that the irreducible core of TO is that ‘it is theatre *of* the oppressed, not theatre *for* the oppressed which would be some kind of patronising act; it’s not theatre *about* the oppressed, though indeed that is its subject

³⁰ Adrian Jackson and Jonathan Petherbridge (founder of London Bubble) remain firm friends to this day after they encountered one another ‘in Boalian circles’ during the late 1980s, around the time Jackson was completing his translation of Augusto Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* from French into English. He completed this project in 1992 soon after he was employed to work as an Associate Director of London Bubble. Jackson not only directed several theatre-based and site-specific shows in this role, but he also designed and ran the Bubble’s outreach project working with homeless people. This project formed the basis of what would become Cardboard Citizens. See: Adrian Jackson, Interview, 2011.

³¹ Katrina Duncan and Adrian Jackson, *Cardboard Citizens: 25 Years* (London: Cardboard Citizens, 2017), 6.

³² Duncan and Jackson, *Cardboard Citizens: 25 Years*, 8; Babbage, *Augusto Boal*, 70.

matter; no, it is theatre *of* the oppressed, it *belongs* to the oppressed'.³³ However, in charting the history of the company, there are constant refinements of practice to improve the ethical recognition of the members as stake-holders and rights-owners.

Cardboard Citizens was named at a time when there were semi-structured 'cardboard cities' of homeless communities skirting and permeating London's architecture of wealth and power.³⁴ Jackson recalls the first piece of Forum Theatre was staged for 'lost souls' in Waterloo, this poeticised labelling of the homeless group, belying his experience of 'a wild night which took our rather straitlaced reading of Forum Theatre to whole new areas of chaotic beauty and possibility'.³⁵ As Jackson acknowledges, the central Forum principle, that the oppressed group are the experts in their own oppression, was reemphasised in real-time to all members of the nascent company that night. In an interview with Jasper Rees, Jackson unsentimentally recalls that the initial constituents of the company's workshops were 'a mixture of street homeless people' and did not attract a single 'type' of homeless Londoner. There were 'druggy people, thuggy people, transvestites, prostitutes of both sexes, young students: sofa-surfing'.³⁶ Jackson admits he initially believed this early incarnation of Cardboard Citizens would be a defined project, with a strict, time-bound agenda to establish a sustainable model of self-governance within the homeless communities in which they worked. As per TO intentions, they would foster the conditions for 'the conquest of the means of theatrical production':³⁷ 'I honestly thought that I would be in-and-out within three years because the classic community development model is to help people set something up,

³³ Cardboard Citizens, 'Adrian Jackson, What is the essence of Theatre of the Oppressed?' (2019) accessed: March 19, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46Om7mAz6Kk>

³⁴ Katerina Kokkinos-Kennedy, *Making the Invisible Visible* (2009) <http://www.artshub.co.uk/uk/newsPrint.asp?sId=91586> accessed: March 15, 2011.

³⁵ Duncan and Jackson, *Cardboard Citizens: 25 Years*, 10.

³⁶ Jasper Rees, *The Homeless Act*. 12 July 2003 accessed March 04, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3598397/The-homeless-act.html2003>

³⁷ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by. Charles A. McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979), Foreword.

go away, do your own thing, but curiously I am still there’.³⁸ Cardboard Citizens has retained a practitioner-led approach despite the initial ambition of devolving its working practice to stakeholders. In our interview, Jackson pointed to the complex knot of political, structural, and systemic factors for homeless people that necessitates an ongoing role for the arts facilitator. The position for homeless people in the UK since the inception of Cardboard Citizens has arguably become more challenging, and the threats to their human rights more complex.

There is no small element of personal pride in Jackson’s acknowledgement of his status as ‘a fairly hard task master’ and a self-styled disputant of, and dissident from the community theatre ecology because of his emphasis on ‘professional’ standards:³⁹ ‘in the end [...] people want to be respected, and a sign of respect is to say “no that’s not good enough; you can do better than that”’.⁴⁰ In conversation, he was full of playful challenge as he described how he felt an inflationary emphasis on ‘process’ was often an alibi for a lack of quality in the ‘products’ of community theatre, or for ‘people being sloppy about work’.⁴¹ I return to the politics of this value system as I discuss the output and dynamics of ACT NOW, and how ideas and enactments of ‘professionalism’ have potential offer participation within cultural life as a rights-claiming exercise. Jackson values the disharmony and contention which are clearly at the heart of both his own robust praxis and which he identifies in Boalian methodologies: ‘We live in a society obsessed with consensus [...] Well, I’m not an agreeer,

³⁸ Adrian Jackson, ‘The impro heritage: AIN Amsterdam Conference,’ Interview by Paul Jackson, 2010, (01 September 2010).

³⁹ Jackson is known as a teacher and expert TO practitioner outside his work with Cardboard Citizens. On the British Council website, for instance, he is described as ‘a leading expert on the Theatre of the Oppressed, and a well-travelled teacher and speaker. Jackson has taught Theatre of the Oppressed work in many contexts, throughout Britain and Ireland, and in France, Hong Kong, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, India, Colombia and Kosovo.’ He also carries *cachet* as an independent director as evinced by the two separate commissions that he received from the RSC. See: <https://www.britishcouncil.es/en/events/adrian-jackson-mbe-director-del-cardboard-citizens>

⁴⁰ Adrian Jackson, ‘Interview with Adrian Jackson – Cardboard Citizens: by Ancecy Lax’, 26 July, 2011.

⁴¹ Adrian Jackson, Interview, 2011.

I'm a disagreeer. I like to, and I think it's healthy to argue with each other, and that's at the centre of the Theatre of the Oppressed'.⁴² Jackson claims his belligerence and unorthodoxy has sustained the company's artistic reputation for over three decades, while simultaneously and 'doggedly assert[ing] the human rights of homeless people'.⁴³

Cardboard Citizens has grown into a theatre company that engages over 1,500 homeless people per year with an annual turnover in healthy excess of £1m.⁴⁴ The company has since diversified to deliver both specialised training, capacity building, and complex theatrical productions which require a wide professional skill-base. Their contemporary prominence in the field, and the support they now enjoy, bears witness to decades of engagement, experiment, and development of their community practice, and their tenacious connection of creative form with activist content. As Cardboard Citizens has developed into one of the foremost applied theatre companies, they continue to make work designed to be played directly to homeless people, but also 'theatre for general audiences so a wider public can share in the company's learning and understanding of the issues faced by homeless people'.⁴⁵ The company's theatre production work has included ambitious site-specific projects and politicised adaptations of existing texts; this repertoire often performed by professional actors alongside community participants with direct experience of homelessness. Cardboard Citizens recurrently excavate historical and literary source material, reworking Gay's *Beggar's Opera* at the Bridewell Theatre (1999) or cutting up Orwell's picaresque *Down and Out in Paris and London* as *Down/Out* (2007), to draw parallels with the contemporary treatment of homelessness people. In deploying promenade form to tell the story of the peregrinations of *Pericles* (2003), or immersive staging to bring us closer to the

⁴² Adrian Jackson, 'The impro heritage,' 2010.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cardboard Citizens, 'Cardboard Citizens Annual Report,' (London: Cardboard Citizens, 2017), 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

macabre twists of World War II's Operation Mincemeat (*Mincemeat*, 2009), or video-artistry to dramatise contemporary conflict over rights to the Chagos Islands (*A Few Man Fridays*, 2012), Cardboard Citizens have used expansive, multiple, hybrid theatre forms and fictions to highlight the complexity of factors in social exclusion.

Alongside their catalogue of theatre productions intended for wider audiences, they have also made numerous Forum Theatre pieces played directly to the homeless community in hostel settings, such as *Going... Going... Gone* (2002), *Led Easy* (2009), *Bystanders* (2019). These Forum pieces are mostly performed by those who have experienced homelessness themselves, participating both *within* and *without* the play to authenticate a lived understanding of the issues faced by the audience: 'when we go into a place, and people can see that we are not just a bunch of middle-class twats, obviously it works better'.⁴⁶ For Jackson this relationship matrix encourages the further *multiplication* effects of TO.⁴⁷ The use of TO and Forum Theatre as participatory tools for consciousness-raising, and the claiming of human rights, underlies my discussion of Cardboard Citizens, ACT NOW, and the subsequent analysis of the work of Tony Cealy and the Black Men's Consortium. Notably, Cardboard Citizens also offers education, employment advice, and advocacy support for its homeless members and audiences. Included in their portfolio of outreach work are TO workshops for drama practitioners, for corporate clients, and performance skills workshops for homeless people intended to affect the 'performance' of everyday living for this vulnerable constituency. Frances Babbage defines the Cardboard Citizens portfolio, stating 'the company's work thus extends far beyond theatre-making; nevertheless, this

⁴⁶ Adrian Jackson quoted in Jasper Rees, 'The Homeless Act,' *The Telegraph*. 12 July 2003. Accessed March 04, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3598397/The-homeless-act.html>.

⁴⁷ See: Part II, 'Critical reflections on the early multiplication of Theatre of the Oppressed,' in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre of the Oppressed*, ed. Kelly Howe, Julian Boal and Jose Soeiro (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

remains central'.⁴⁸ Indeed, as I argue in this section, maintaining the 'centrality' of theatre and performance in the tapestry of work undertaken by Cardboard Citizens, and particularly by ACT NOW, offers a distinctive opportunity for rights capacity-building amongst the participants.

Forum Theatre – Becoming Conscious

Through Adrian Jackson, the company are custodians of Augusto Boal's legacy in the UK. Jackson was Boal's friend, collaborator, and translator. Alongside British contemporaries like Tim Wheeler (Mind the Gap), Geraldine Ling (Lawnmowers Independent Theatre), Paul Heritage (Peoples Palace Projects), Ali Campbell (Breakout T.I.E.), and James Thompson (Theatre in Prisons and Probation), Jackson remains an active and prominent champion of Boal's practice in the UK, publishing on the subject and lecturing at international gatherings of TO practitioners. Cardboard Citizens deploys a range of Boalian concepts and methodologies throughout their work: from the dialogic and interventionist architecture of Forum Theatre to the reformist, utopian rhetoric of Legislative Theatre, and its emphasis on 'using performance to make politics'.⁴⁹ Much of the applied theatre programme of Cardboard Citizens is underpinned by TO techniques which aim to engage communities in democratic dialogues through the participatory and embodied politics of Forum Theatre. Indeed, as Boal states, this 'is not the old didactic theatre', emphasising the re-distribution of the narrative through the collected assembly, 'we all learn together, actors and audience'.⁵⁰ I

⁴⁸ Babbage, *Augusto Boal*, 70-71.

⁴⁹ This is the subtitle of Boal's collection of essays and recollections, *Legislative Theatre* [1998], translated by Jackson. Legislative Theatre is a descendant of Forum Theatre, where participants have the opportunity to engage in direct or symbolic legislative action and rehearse the potential outcomes of laws that they would like to see enacted.

⁵⁰ Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, translated by Adrian Jackson (Oxford: Routledge, 1995).

shall look more closely at this mode of work below and consider how TO mechanisms present complicated obligations for ‘oppressed’ beneficiary individuals or groups⁵¹.

During its first six years, the company focussed on delivering workshops and issued Forum Theatre plays to identified homeless constituencies. The company’s first Forum plays, *Pimps, Pushers and Prostitutes* (1993) and *Stop the Rot* (1994) dramatised the ways sexual and mental abuse contributed to street homelessness, directly developed from narratives found in the workshops.⁵² Forum Theatre is Boal’s enjoiner for the audience to halt the action of the play at the crux of a problem and offer their proposals for alternative solutions. In Forum, participation is not a solely cerebral observation, nor opinions from the side-lines for others to perform; in Forum, spectators intervene directly in the dramatic action to replace the actors on stage and begin acting out their proposed solutions to the dilemma posed. Thus, in Boal’s conception, there are no longer audience members, instead, they are recast under a more agentic denomination as ‘spect-actors’.⁵³ As ‘spect-actors’, they become protagonists themselves, having an opportunity to rehearse solutions which will defeat their oppressors, thereby embodying the moment of human rights crisis and, potentially, its resolution. In the Forum Theatre model, participants can contribute to and change the story in a real-time performance event, in an act of collaborative authorship that not only helps to surface seldom heard voices, but also enables active embodiment of rehearsal for change. A rehearsal for rights-claiming. Forum’s effect lies in enhanced modes of *sentient* participation, a chosen moment of embodiment where the struggles of the protagonist are not only understood, but sensate, within a three-dimensional, dynamic, aesthetic event. The

⁵¹ Carmel O’Sullivan, ‘Searching for the Marxist in Boal’, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol 6, no.1. (2010) 92; Sonia Hamel, ‘When theatre of the oppressed becomes theatre of the oppressor’, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* Vol 18, no.4 (2013), 415-416.

⁵² Duncan & Jackson, *Cardboard Citizens: 25 Years*, 12.

⁵³ Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, translated by Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 2002).

possibilities for alternative actions are manifold, unpredictable, and co-created in the moment. Participants are thus shaping and engaging with the emergent narratives, and in a manifestation of affect, creating them, and simultaneously being created by them. ‘I’m running the show, *you’re* writing the script’, joker Terry O’Leary informed the audience during *Or Am I Alone?* (2011), entreating them to participate in the performance on stage: ‘*you’re* in this fight too, and there’s more to come. Tell it like it is, mean it. I want to believe. I want to believe in better endings’.⁵⁴ In Boal’s Forum, there is no ‘magical solution’ but a proliferation of plurality: possible avenues to be explored through the intertwined subjectivities within the ‘assemblage’ of the event. It is in this disruption of hegemonic social and political narratives, in the hierarchy of relationships, and the rupture to the aesthetic frame, that Boal located Forum’s radical and liberatory potential, as a ‘rehearsal for revolution’.⁵⁵ Qualities conducive to a human rights theatre.

Boal’s vivid recollections and recounting of Forum successes and failures demonstrate outcomes vary depending on context, conditions, and the communities involved, but with some profound interventions realised through the practice. This socially contingent and locative aspect of Forum Theatre is neatly summarised by Babbage as ‘not didactic but rather founded on the belief that audience members themselves have at least some of the answers to the problems enacted’.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Forum must be animated by a genuine question which requires an answer, not a problem designed to elicit a prescribed solution; as Jackson insists, it should not ‘seduce people into a particular mode of thinking: if the question isn’t real, why ask the question? Just tell people what to do instead’.⁵⁷ Boal argues

⁵⁴ Lizzie Nunnery, *Or Am I Alone?* Performed by Terry O’Leary, Toynbee Hall Studios, London, 01 January (2010).

⁵⁵ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 98.

⁵⁶ Babbage, *Augusto Boal*, 71.

⁵⁷ Adrian Jackson, ‘What is the essence of Theatre of the Oppressed?’, Cardboard Citizens, 2019, accessed January 01, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46Om7mAz6Kk>

that the ‘problem’ at the heart of the play must speak directly to the audience.⁵⁸ ‘It is striking how eagerly audiences participate: there is a strong identification with the problems being explored’, states Howard Loxton in a review of *Or Am I Alone?*, concluding, ‘the urge to contribute seems to overcome any shyness about getting up in public. In fact, the very act of doing so and having your ideas presented and debated is clearly a tremendous booster’.⁵⁹ At its best, Forum Theatre retains the subversive intentions of its origins, ‘as a counterweight to the standard power relations obtaining in the theatre context, and by extension, in society’.⁶⁰ Critically, for the purposes of this chapter, which questions whether embodied modes of participation can build consciousness towards human rights, the dialogic dynamic inherent in the practice of Boal means the spect-actor is often required to argue their way out of a crisis, which I identify as a mode of rights-based discourse. Forum interventions are characterised by people ‘laying down the law’, giving chapter and verse on the legitimacy of an action, fierce with claims of ‘I know my rights’. Jackson picks up the language of human rights to describe how Forum Theatre ‘implicates the audience in the action of the piece by stimulating the essential, but often dormant, human urge to put right injustice’.⁶¹

However, before I uncritically claim Forum as a ‘rights-generating machine’, this form can locate social issues as endogenous, and as a problem for the indigenous community to solve. Whilst noting the wider political frameworks and exogenous power structures, it is the conduct and decisions of the individual spect-actor which are privileged in this format. In the circumstances depicted in the Cardboard Citizens’ Forum plays, it becomes clear difficulties are implicitly governed or intensified by structural issues: welfare measures,

⁵⁸ Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 258.

⁵⁹ Howard Loxton, *Theatre Review: Or Am I Alone?* September 2010, accessed January 2020. <https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/orami-rev>.

⁶⁰ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 141.

⁶¹ Adrian Jackson, ‘Provoking Intervention,’ *The Applied Theatre Reader*, edited by Tim Prentki and Shelia Preston (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 41.

criminalising sex work, new housing regulations, to name a few. By inviting the spect-actor to offer solutions and argue for new behaviours, Cardboard Citizens are complicit with an illusion these are matters over which homeless people have control. The criticism that Boalian Forum offers ‘facile remedy’ and ‘reductive’ distillations of complex problems is part of the standard contemporary critique of TO.⁶² Carmel O’Sullivan, for instance, rejects Boal’s ‘reformist political approaches’ where instead of ‘developing increased understanding of the complex social and material relations in capitalist society, Boal’s participants are engaged in a struggle that involves them in seeking to regain their humanity through becoming in turn an oppressor of the oppressors’.⁶³ David Davis and O’Sullivan suggest that Boal’s techniques are in fact more accommodationist than revolutionary, despite Boal’s espoused Marxist commitments.⁶⁴ They argue that TO reinforces idealist notions that thought determines social being, rather than the other way around. For Davis and O’Sullivan, Boal’s work—and implicitly that of his successors, like Cardboard Citizens and Cealy—shies away from substantive systemic critique, cloaking power structures, and encouraging individuals to *accommodate to* social systems rather than dismantling or revolutionizing them. However, while O’Sullivan is unstinting in her diagnosis of TO as a ‘destructive and manipulative practice’,⁶⁵ Cardboard Citizens have arguably dynamised Boal’s epithet ‘a rehearsal for revolution’ to their advantage, positioning Forum as a preparatory process. I suggest that, although Cardboard Citizens’ work—especially as realised through the ACT NOW programme—does ask for individuals to place themselves in the heat of the crisis; the framing often prepares the spect-actor to recognise and castigate or call upon wider, larger powers to enact a solution. I now turn to a closer examination of the underpinning values of

⁶² Hamel, ‘When theatre of the oppressed becomes theatre of the oppressor,’ 415.

⁶³ O’Sullivan, ‘Searching for the Marxist in Boal,’ 90.

⁶⁴ See: David Davis & Carmel O’Sullivan, ‘Boal and the Shifting Sands: the Un-Political Master Swimmer,’ *New Theatre Quarterly* 16, Vol. 3 (2000).

⁶⁵ O’Sullivan, ‘Searching for the Marxist in Boal,’ 90.

the ACT NOW programmes to consider the leverage of inculcating ‘professional’ theatre standards to induce a sense of collectivity and group investment in communal artmaking processes.

ACT NOW – Work Ethics and Performance

When I started to map the work of ACT NOW in 2009, prospective young participants began by attending a ‘taster session’ at the Brady Arts and Community Centre in Tower Hamlets, East London. The worn frontage of the building belied the well-resourced interior of the main hall; a space that denoted a serious attitude to rehearsal and underscored the project’s emphasis on creating and maintaining high-quality, professional performances and standards. ACT NOW prides itself on its ‘very high expectations of people as performers and creators’.⁶⁶ Tony McBride and Terry O’Leary, as artistic leaders of the programme, have been inspiring and formidable in turns, underscoring the tangible ethos and atmosphere of ACT NOW as one of ‘hard work’, purpose, and developing a culture of respect for the artistic process. More prosaically, the initial title of the project was ‘ACT NOW: Rehearsal for Work’, a mercantile reconceptualisation of Boal’s place of revolution, (preparing participants to enter the capitalist domain, rather than liberated from it) and a nomenclature, perhaps, more commensurate with the priorities of original sponsors J.P. Morgan.⁶⁷ When the bank’s investment ceased at the end of the first year, so did the auxiliary epithet, but as I explore through this section, the programme remains ideologically wedded to promoting work skills

⁶⁶ Kokkinos-Kennedy, *Making the Invisible Visible*, 2009.

⁶⁷ Here I am reminded of Boal’s own nausea in having his work associated to corporate settings: There are however some unacceptable deviations – not adaptations of the mechanisms of Theatre of the Oppressed to special conditions and local problems, but total treason to the philosophical basis of this form of theatre, which must be Theatre about, to, and above all, *of* the Oppressed. I have heard of some groups that use Theatre of the Oppressed in ‘business’, allegedly to help the workers to do their work better and in so doing to be more comfortable . . . and productive – they are usually sponsored by the bosses... A.B’ See: Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 9.

and access to employment.⁶⁸ ACT NOW was promoted as ‘an accredited theatre and employability course’ designed for young people ‘who have been, or who are at risk of homelessness’.⁶⁹ The programme recognises not all young people taking part will want to pursue the arts, and so the ‘information, advice and guidance’ element of the project foregrounds access to alternative future pathways; the opportunity to gain qualifications is promoted throughout the programme. Its aims are fundamentally ‘real ground-work stuff’: ‘communication and punctuality, and general confidence [...] in their ability, and in what they need to achieve’, and the imparting of ‘soft, transferable skills’.⁷⁰ As Weatherald describes in our interview, she will often take current and past ACT NOW members into homeless hostels to help ‘market’ the programme to other young people: ‘That really helps a lot, taking those kids along, and sometimes we even manage to get them to go back to their old hostels, which is a real “I used to live here, and then I got involved with this project, and now I’m doing this, and going to uni”’.⁷¹ Despite these (company-defined) measures of success, I note the tensions inherent in an arts-based programme that espouses self-expression, creativity, and passion, but also tacitly endorses the model of employer-led work, where self-fulfilment might be seen to be compromised by the need to ‘earn a living’. As Gramsci posited, rights granted within existing structures and ‘corporate interests’, which do not favour all subjects, will not allow full realisation of humanity, and does not permit the

⁶⁸ Cardboard Citizens joined several other third-sector organisations with a particular focus on youth programmes as ‘approved providers’ to deliver training, support, and mentorship for young people for an initiative funded by Goldman Sachs and The Mayor’s Fund for London. Young London Working offers potential employers ‘access to a zero-cost recruitment service’.
<http://www.younglondonworking.co.uk/content/employers-area>

⁶⁹ ‘ACT NOW (16 - 25)’, Cardboard Citizens accessed April 16, 2012,
<http://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/p2s32.html>. Members could also gain Arts Awards or PEARL accreditation alongside performances. Several of the ACT NOW students have proceeded to take up further theatre training with the National Youth Theatre’s ‘Playing Up’ course which has FE awarding powers of a HE Diploma on successful completion.

⁷⁰ Weatherald, Interview, 2011.

⁷¹ Ibid.

‘intellectual and moral unity’ of collective consciousness.⁷² In the ACT NOW model, the pathway to citizenship might be cultural participation, but the destination is the labour market.

From the initial taster session, participants are invited to attend weekly ‘open-access’ workshops, or ‘drop-ins’, and, at the same time as the group naturally stabilises towards its own self-selecting constituency, the intensive workshops and rehearsals commence that will lead to sharing and performances. The figure for involvement in the shows is around ten percent of those who attend initial workshops, and therefore when considering the impact, outcomes, and effect of participating in the creative process performance, the experience of the remaining percentage of the young people not able to participate further, or who opt out of the final performance, should be remembered.⁷³ In my interview with Tony McBride, he describes the escalation of responsibility and commitment required by the programme: ‘I warn them that the further we go into this process, the higher the bar is raised, and the expectation for them to respond increases – because we’re a professional theatre company and that’s what we do’.⁷⁴ Here, the vocabulary of ‘professional[ism]’ and ‘high expectations’ synthesise with the repeated rhetoric of Adrian Jackson and his diminution of the value of ‘process’ over ‘product’; a message echoed by Terry O’Leary in an ACT NOW promotional video, where she highlights that the professional framework of the project, ‘would be *exactly* how it would be in any other theatre companies’.⁷⁵ Indeed, the history of ACT NOW can be read through their theatre productions such as, *Open Book* (2010), *Up on the Roof* (2010) and *Audition of Dreams* (2011), *Life Ain’t No Musical* (2011), *A Molecular Mass* (2013),

⁷² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2005), 181.

⁷³ Cardboard Citizens, ‘Cardboard Citizens Annual Report,’ (London: Cardboard Citizens, 2021), 16-17.

⁷⁴ Tony McBride, ‘Interview with Tony McBride: Cardboard Citizens,’ by Annecy Lax, 2011, (08 August).

⁷⁵ Cardboard Citizens, *Up on the Roof*, dir. ACT NOW: Cardboard Citizens, London, 2011.

Speakeasy (2015), *Hikiamori* (2017), *Shrieks* (2017), *Label Lottery* (2018), and *Stressing My Identity* (2020). The invocation of a ‘professional’ model has the potential to inculcate pre-ordained behaviours in the group, privileging the monodirectional flow of knowledge from expert leaders and mitigating against the dialogic process at the core of Boal’s philosophy. Here, it might be concluded that the process of conscientization of rights is not realised through a collective model. However, as I go on to describe, this perspective belies the discursiveness, levity, and facilitation skills of McBride, O’Leary et al. discernible in the rehearsal room. This establishes the discussion of aesthetic values and embodied theatre craft as the building of *sentience* to claim the rights of socio-cultural participation.

Although many applied theatre projects never have an intended audience, except for those involved in the process, for ACT NOW, the performance of co-created work as a staged production is a key tenet of the programme.⁷⁶ In performing before a wider audience, often in recognised theatre venues (The Arcola, The Rose Theatre, The Roundhouse Studio), the context of the project hopes to instil a work ethic, inculcate industry standards, and develop professional behaviours. The prospect of performance is held as both ‘carrot and stick’, but here the ‘application’ of theatre relates to the accomplishment of a set of personal challenges fulfilled in the moment of public performance.⁷⁷ ACT NOW must negotiate the persistent tension in the drive for inclusivity and reach, namely, in accommodating ‘chaotic lifestyles’ (perhaps more accurately, traumatised individuals encountering chaotic systems) of many of the participants, and yet still striving for the ‘professional’ standards the company espouses.⁷⁸ As Weatherald noted, once the young people are in the programme, they may well need support and guidance to maintain their attendance because of the complexity and unsettled

⁷⁶ Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009) 10.

⁷⁷ McBride, Interview, 2011.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

nature of their lives. She described some of the barriers to full participation the young people may face: ‘This year, lots of pregnancies and abortions... for the girls. And prison, probation, tags, being on curfew, lots of mental health issues - depression, bipolar, OCD, ADHD - addiction to prescription medicine, or drug use [...] But mental health is the biggest issue that they’re facing’.⁷⁹ Participant, Sarah Bensayed’s happiness at performing in the final staging of *Up on the Roof* (2011) reflects the achievement of her personal goals in overcoming such circumstances: ‘You know what, I loved every single minute of it... It was nerve-wracking in the beginning, but I just got myself together, I believed in myself, and I thought “you know what - this is my time”’.⁸⁰ In reclaiming her ‘time’ and space in society, I contend that ACT NOW enables the restoration of the right to ‘participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts’, for participants like Bensayed.⁸¹ I acknowledge the activation of this right is partially temporally and contextually bound to the duration of this performance, and Bensayed’s positive experience is located within the supportive feedback of an invested audience, however, I argue that in raising consciousness of the possible, that the personal becomes political. Boal’s TO is indeed a dialectical theatre of becoming.

To think in closer detail about the composition of the collective, within and around the prime participant group, I want to create a rich description of event dynamics, using an early example of practice. On the night I see my first ever ACT NOW performance, *Stick to the Script*, the forum fails spectacularly through a lack of collective purpose, but in performing that failure, a greater consensus is also gained.⁸² Kieran Jordan, as the feather-hatted boss of the chicken-shop in which the play is set, summarily dismisses the middle-

⁷⁹ Weatherald, Interview, 2011.

⁸⁰ Bensayed cited in Cardboard Citizens, ‘Up on The Roof by ACT NOW, Cardboard Citizens,’ 5 January, 2011.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf6C7T7dJDI>

⁸¹ UN General Assembly, ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ 217 (III) A (Paris, 1948)

⁸² Cardboard Citizens, *Stick to the Script*, Oxford House, London, 18th September 2009

class virtues of polite complaint and logical explanation privileged by the (older) community professionals who volunteer to replace the protagonist. Younger members of the audience – mostly friends of the performers – laugh explosively and applaud when Jordan bests their interventions with the realities of working a below-minimum-wage job. To the noisy delight of the spectators, Tony McBride, as Joker, is forced to gather up the chastened spect-actor, and playfully chide the players for making the fight seem unwinnable.⁸³ It is not the participation of the spect-actor, gamely rehearsing change through the embodiment of another's predicament, searching for *sentience* through a corporeal commitment to another's moment of crisis, that arouses the collective consciousness of the audience, but rather the participation of the ACT NOW performers reclaiming some status through the refutation of ideas of professional comportment. During *Stick to the Script*, those who are normally excluded due to their apparent lack of social capital, coalesce around a rejection of the corporate, conscientized into a collective bond and *sentient* connection between themselves and other young, disenfranchised people in the audience. In later Forum pieces, such as *Up on the Roof* (2012) there was observably more reciprocity between the ACT NOW cast and the spect-actors, but in this initial outing, the cues passed from the cast to their audience coterie meant that spect-actors replacing the protagonist came to be seen as part of the oppressive system - not despite their 'good intentions' but *because* of them. In my discussions with ACT NOW members, they were typically effusive about the 'information, advice and guidance' given to them throughout the process, gratefully recognising the 'care' shown by project workers and describing them as 'family': 'even though I don't have a family', reported member Markus Juniar, ACT NOW 'made me feel like they were my family from day one'.⁸⁴ Indeed, this programme often plays to audiences who have an active

⁸³ I shall return to the problematics of keeping an audience engaged in the possibility of change in Forum Theatre in my later discussion of the work of Tony Cealy.

⁸⁴ Cardboard Citizens, 'Annual Review 2010-2011,' London, 2011. 8-9.

role in shaping the performance content and are most likely to derive meaning. However, Terry O’Leary offers a subtle rejoinder to the well-worn accusation of preaching to the converted:

...the audience on the night will contain key-workers, social workers, adults that are part of the young people’s experience, it is good for that audience to also see so many of the obstacles that young people are up against and how *they* perceive having to interact with these authority figures. Once the audience begin recognising themselves on stage in those situations, then they will begin to care more about the main character.⁸⁵

I recognised, that evening, a sense of liberation in the cast’s rejection of ‘sensible advice’, as the in-group highlighted the systemic and structural obstacles they encounter. As Jackson himself acknowledges, ‘Forum Theatre should always retain at least a frisson of the ‘original sin’ of transgression’.⁸⁶ In this sense, the performance *was* a rehearsal for revolution, a move away from statelessness and *voicelessness*, and towards the noisy claiming of rights. Keeping the voices of the participants in focus for the following section, I turn to consider the productive differences of this, not as a process of education, but as a human rights theatre.

Not A Formal Education

ACT NOW members, Terry Sheehan and Markus Juniar, credit the programme with sparking tangible changes in their lives: ‘Myself, I think I done pretty well’ announces Sheehan with shining confidence in an interview on the making of *Open Book*. ‘From how I started and how I was, and for how my confidence was before I moved into this course, a massive boost’, he says, before qualifying: ‘It’s an opportunity to make something of yourself, prove

⁸⁵ Terry O’Leary, ‘Interview with Terry O’Leary: Cardboard Citizens by Anecy Lax,’ London, 2011.

⁸⁶ Adrian Jackson, *Provoking Intervention*, 46.

everyone else wrong'.⁸⁷ He is joined in his praise of the project by Juniar who reflects: 'For me, from where I've come from, from the estates and that, I would never have been here, in ACT NOW like for two years. So, I'm pretty proud of myself'.⁸⁸ They are amongst over a thousand young people who have participated in Cardboard Citizens' youth programme since it launched in 2009. Juniar credits the ACT NOW project with reversing the trajectory caused by his homelessness, giving him the confidence to return to college where he gained skills he now uses in a management position. The ACT NOW programme can claim quantifiable success in reducing the capital's NEET statistics (if sometimes temporarily), with around 450 young people helped into work placements and 200 receiving GCSE-equivalent accreditation in performance training.⁸⁹

Cardboard Citizens have purposefully disassociated ACT NOW from previous projects in formal school settings and the spectre of functional theatre-in-education. Both Weatherald and McBride note ACT NOW is not intended to replicate recognised official structures which might have problematic authoritarian associations for participants.⁹⁰ Moreover, as theorist Anthony Jackson indicates, the deployment of theatre companies as 'non-formal education operations' can strain artistic and ethical integrity where 'companies have found themselves used as convenient sticking-plasters to cover up uncomfortable gaps in the school sector'.⁹¹ Cardboard Citizens have coordinated projects for younger people

⁸⁷ Terry Sheehan, 'Interview with Terry Sheehan: ACT NOW: Carboard Citizens by Anney Lax', London, 2011.

⁸⁸ Markus Juniar, 'Interview with Markus Juniar: ACT NOW: Carboard Citizens by Anney Lax', London, 2011.

⁸⁹ Cardboard Citizens, 'Cardboard Citizens: Annual Report' (London: Cardboard Citizens, 2017), 22.

⁹⁰ Furthermore, with Cardboard Citizens' relationship to the dialectical pedagogical model of Paulo Freire, the 'father' of Augusto Boal (Boal, *Legislative Theatre*, 126-129), it is also tempting to speculate that the company have scaled back their work with schools due to their complicity with the 'coercion and subjugation' of the formal education system which secures the status quo of 'governance and social-discipline' See: Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 1980) 84.

⁹¹ Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meaning: Art or Instrument* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 43.

since 1996, incorporating engagement with schools as outreach adjuncts to the theatre productions but also as targeted and tailored programmes using Forum Theatre method to address ‘youth-related’ issues. With ACT NOW, Cardboard Citizens were not solely ‘educating’ young people about the challenges of homelessness, as with earlier Forum pieces such as *Another Planet* which toured schools in 2003, instead ACT NOW were also pursuing the parent company’s mission to work directly with those who have lived experience of homelessness. Tony McBride was present during these early days of the company’s youth work; devising a piece called *Fairground* (2003) with 20 young people aged 13-18 to educate ‘at risk’ youngsters about the consequences of knife crime, and again in 2004 with a Forum piece called *Occupation: Excluded*. These early works with younger people did not wear their colours lightly, often commissioned and funded by organisations committed to inculcating specific standards of behaviour. Prentki and Preston pithily designate this category of applied theatre as ‘tasked theatre’, meaning that which ‘is being attached to some other activity as a bandage that might be applied to a wound’.⁹² Helen Nicholson cautions against the use of applied theatre practice to template ‘officially sanctioned versions of citizenship education’ which, she argues, nullifies the potential for a ‘radical citizenship’ which is more ‘creative, unpredictable and subversive’.⁹³ I would argue that the successor ACT NOW programme is less concerned with quasi-community policing functions, such as reducing knife crime, or encouraging participants to make socially acceptable choices. If we read ACT NOW through the content of its performance work, we find new goals of self-actualisation, moving beyond past traumas, towards a celebration of autonomy, communal support, forging (quasi-)familial ties, and a collective understanding of oppression and the dispossession of rights. In what is a very conscious move by McBride and O’Leary away

⁹² Prentki and Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader*, 10.

⁹³ Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 20.

from ‘tasked theatre’, ACT NOW instead urges audiences (and participants themselves) to decouple expectations of this NEET group from crime and other social-ills – to use Prentki and Preston’s terminology, the ‘wound’ that needs bandaging– and instead to permit a more holistic identity to exist in rehearsal and on stage. Through a consultative life-writing methodology, individual participants can (re)claim a higher degree of sovereignty over their staged representation.

All of ACT NOW’s productions are devised-scripted pieces and, by expediency or design, have incorporated the personal stories of the young participants involved. As we have seen in Chapter 1 in this thesis, autobiographical ‘texts’ or ‘first voice art-making’ occurs across many different performance phenomena, particularly where the recovery of testimony is a political act. In applied theatre contexts, the use of personal narrative provides a rejoinder for those who are or have been excluded – subtly or explicitly – from a range of human rights. Personal testimony in applied theatre can potentially address young people’s exclusion from the economic, social, and cultural rights indispensable for dignity and the free development of personality, as well as free participation in the cultural life of the community, and the ‘right to freedom of expression’.⁹⁴ However, Nicholson advises that, ‘sharing stories changes their ownership’, rendering the storytellers vulnerable because, ‘stories, once told, have a life beyond the immediate context in which they were heard’.⁹⁵ However, practitioner Penny Bundy, who uses drama to assist adult survivors of institutional childhood abuse, suggests ‘the storyteller’ gains an experience of ‘elevated status and a sense of power and control in the telling and creation process’.⁹⁶ McBride is sensitive to accusations of making

⁹⁴ UN General Assembly, ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights,’ 217 (III) A (Paris, 1948)

⁹⁵ Helen Nicholson, ‘Re-locating Memory: Performance, reminiscence and communities of diaspora.’ *The Applied Theatre Reader*, edited by Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 271.

⁹⁶ Penny Bundy, ‘The Performance of Trauma,’ in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, ed. Tim Prentki and Shelia Preston, (London: Routledge. 2009) 238.

capital from young people's personal narratives, insistent upon the application of aesthetics which Bundy argues can be used to encourage participants to *redraw* themselves within the parameters of their own stories through metaphor and allegory. For McBride, the process of creating and sharing these stories is a cornerstone of ACT NOW's devising process and part of their socially-therapeutic mission to create a safe space for previously (self-)censored narratives: 'I was really quite shocked and surprised when I first heard them say that they don't share stories with each other in their hostels'.⁹⁷ McBride recalling that the young people were incredulous in their response, "'it's the last thing that we would do, I'm not going to make myself vulnerable'".⁹⁸ For McBride, creating reciprocity in shared storytelling and the collective process of exchange are essential central tenants that, importantly, lead to personal, social and collective consciousness: 'there is something about the act of telling their stories with one another, listening to one another's stories and telling your own, and knowing that yours is going to be listened to respectfully and without judgement – this is massive'.⁹⁹ During months of development before the final on-stage performance, the ACT NOW ensemble effectively engages in an extended performance of revelation to, and for, each other. In the emerging 'anthology' of stories (to borrow the sub-title of *Open Book*), there resides a collection of truths, revealed through collective and individual acts of self-determination, the revelation of pre-performance selves, performed to a listening proto-audience in the form of other members of the ensemble.

In *Open Book: An Anthology* (2010), the participant-performers play with the concept of a multiplicity and interchangeability of identities by exploring the metaphor of person-as-anthology. As one participant, Ruby Wild, described in interview, the play centered around

⁹⁷ Tony McBride, 'Interview with Tony McBride: Cardboard Citizens by Annecy Lax', (08 August 2011).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

the ‘preconceptions and stereotypes that young people have been given and what they act up to’.¹⁰⁰ Here, Wild characterises persona as being both a survival skill and a self-fulfilling snare for young people who face a plurality of oppression through homelessness. The content of *Open Book* is not didactic, instead it is plotted between individual and communally accelerated ‘transformations’ that have occurred in the group through participation in ACT NOW.¹⁰¹ This work does not, solely, celebrate the ‘achievement’ of more palatable social behaviour but commends the process of participating in aesthetic acts. *Open Book* featured occasional slips into declamatory and gestural performance modes, overridden by witty, close-knit writing and trickster barbs at the political hijacking of welfare and justice.¹⁰² An insistent and continuous live musical score by regular ACT NOW collaborator, Arun Ghosh, gave the prose-poem form of the play pace and elevation, tying together episodic scenes with animations of the interleaving pages of books projected on the screen behind. The devised roots of this piece are visibly indebted to Boal’s Image Theatre and to collective games and exercises, with participant Kieran Jordan identifying it as a form of ‘collage’, an unconventional narrative, ‘an ensemble piece’.¹⁰³ In *Open Book*, stories are told, swapped, and co-owned; the audience teased with suggestions of proximity to autobiographical revelation. Through multiple perspectives and the dispersal of monologue, the piece plays with our perceptions of identity, and the layered complexity that sits below the (sometimes necessary) ‘preconceptions and stereotypes’ Wild identified. This polyvocal piece creates a contemporary Greek chorus, collectively commentating on the state of the nation. Heddon argues the ‘self’ can become usefully oblique in the domain of autobiographical performance, ‘as a means to reveal not only the multiplicity of the performing subject, but also the

¹⁰⁰ Cardboard Citizens, *An Open Book: An Anthology*, dir. ACT NOW: Cardboard Citizens, London, 2011.

¹⁰¹ Or, in an acknowledgement of the hyperbolic nature of term, ‘changes’, is Adrian Jackson’s preferred ‘gentler word’ (See Cardboard Citizens, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E55ixCfb7Us&t=2s>)

¹⁰² I watched *Open Book* when it was first staged at the Brady Arts Centre in London and then again at the International Youth Theatre Festival in Kingston.

¹⁰³ Cardboard Citizens, *An Open Book: An Anthology* dir. ACT NOW, 2011.

multiplicity of discourses that work to forge subjects'.¹⁰⁴ For Heddon, the presence of the author/performer reflects not solely the projection of binary truth and counter-truths about an individual, but also stands for the presence of a 'multiplicity' of political positions and social responses which create the subject in the present cultural moment of encounter. This is illustrated in the following extract:

So, the covers have been opened. The authors have been revealed. And what do you see? Do you see someone that is wasting their time with crime and, a lack of, punishment?

Do you see someone who scares you, and makes you ashamed to be British? Do you see someone who needs a kick up the arse? Someone that a bit of National Service wouldn't sort out?

I'll tell you who I see, I see people, young people making their way on their own as needs be, or together if the opportunity allows.¹⁰⁵

The play concluded with the nine-strong ensemble removing identical white hoodies to reveal primary-coloured t-shirts with words emblazoned across the front – confident, satisfied, excited, secure, connected, calm, content, free, free, free. The t-shirts were made after an early exercise during the devising process in which the group were asked how they would like to feel in five years' time; the finished t-shirts presented to the group at the final rehearsal. And in memory of Kieran Jordan, the poignancy of the moment is retrospectively intensified by the fact that not every member of ACT NOW on that stage at Brady House lived to see the next five years.

¹⁰⁴ Dierdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 39.

¹⁰⁵ Cardboard Citizens, *An Open Book: An Anthology* dir. ACT NOW, 2011.

Aesthetic Re-Cognitions

The ACT NOW programme has produced several performance pieces with interleaving and overlapping cohorts. It opened with what Adrian Jackson described as ‘a baggy old piece of Forum Theatre’.¹⁰⁶ As referenced above, *Stick to the Script* (2009) was a cartoon-coloured, hyperreal Forum play located in a soul-crushing world of fast-food service, complete with the characteristic confrontations of Forum, interspersed with group, image-based vignettes and rap segues to amplify the narrative content. From these ‘baggy’ beginnings, ACT NOW has consistently pushed the artistic parameters of their output towards increasingly experimental and diverse modes of performance. *Life Ain’t No Musical* was produced in July 2011 and included original film, music, animation, and spoken word, culminating in a dramatic Kurt Weil meets drum-and-bass performance, which I recall below to articulate the building of rights-language and rights entitlement forged through the participatory process.

The Brady Arts Centre is sweltering in late summer heat in July 2011, and the stifling atmosphere is emphasising my trepidation on behalf of the ACT NOW company on this opening night of *Life Ain’t No Musical*. I have been present at rehearsals and for an early sharing of the work and am invested in the success of this show and in the young performers. The last time I saw the work-in-progress, there were flashes of brilliance, exuberance, and moving revelation, but it lacked coherence. Some members of the company were facing serious challenges to their continued participation; for some, it was difficult to sustain the intimate demands of the collective space of the ensemble. As the show starts, my heart thuds as though, I too, am about to perform, but this performance of the circus-cum-musical-hall show is joyous, with an episodic framework that allows individual stories to be sonorous amidst the choral refrain: ‘together in a world that will soon be over, together in a world one

¹⁰⁶ Jackson, Interview, 2011.

and all'.¹⁰⁷ Jason Barton is the MC, tall and confident, in a long red frock coat and black top hat, punctuating the scenes with spoken word commentaries, whilst the rest of the company emerge from costume rails in tattered malion grey garments. There remain some clunky shifts between scenes, but in community work, where I would argue, we sometimes want to see the *people* performing, the existence of imperfectly human moments serves as authentication of the process. The cast grow in stature and verve, until they reach the ascendancy of the final song 'and with a breath, and a will, we rise up, we go free. Up and up to a higher point of view, breaking through the fear'.¹⁰⁸ The audience around me all seem to be moving as one with the cast, the joy of participation rolling off the stage and up around the spectators. My initial nerves have turned to emotional release, overcome with admiration as I join the rest of the audience for the standing ovation. 'Theatre can have a transformational effect' recorded one spectator of *Life Ain't No Musical*, 'as an audience member sometimes a theatrical piece can just blow you away and cause a paradigm shift in consciousness to occur. When it happens to both the cast and audience it's a very special event'.¹⁰⁹ To great whoops and cheers every member takes a solo bow to the repeated sung refrain of 'we go free, we go free'. Barton is last. Watching the video playback, I see him flourish the top hat. A job well done. On October 30th, 2011, only three months later, Barton was killed outside his block of flats in Roehampton. He was 25. *Life Ain't No Musical* was 'remixed' for further outings in the summer of 2012, performing at diverse venues including the Arcola Tent, London City Hall, and the Royal Opera House. There were new cast members, new songs, new stories. The performance, as it should, belonged now to a new ensemble.

¹⁰⁷ Tony McBride, *Life Ain't No Musical*, performed by ACT NOW (Brady House, London, 28 July 2011).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ J. Rutter, 'Theatre Thoughts', 27 July, 2011, accessed September 01, 2011 <https://theblogoftheatrethings.com>

Through the facilitation of McBride and O’Leary, the aesthetic experience for the audience and participants alike in *Life Ain’t No Musical* was propelled to stimulate a *sentient* response, sensory activity, and aesthetic delight in the use of theatrical artistry to ignite a further (re)cognition of the narrative content.¹¹⁰ The experience underlines the argument of John Dewey that ‘knowledge is transformed in an aesthetic experience’ which ‘enables people to rise above their circumstances, to dream new visions and to hold on to old ones. It fosters inventions and discoveries, facilitates simple improvements to people’s lives and uplifts our spirits’.¹¹¹ The experimentation with multiple media and performance textures in ACT NOW productions is seemingly in dialogue with Augusto Boal’s final treatise, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (2006). Boal was initially dismissive of ‘theatrical’ effects in the staging of Forum, lest it should introduce a ‘contrary’ purpose and suppress ‘reflection, argument and action’.¹¹² However, years later – and spanning the period that saw Cardboard Citizens transition from making ‘agit-prop’ community theatre, to a recognition of the transformative and provocative power of ‘art’ in applied theatre practice – Boal reflected on the possibility of what ‘theatricality’ can provide. ‘Yes, beauty! The “B” word’, Adrian Jackson enthused in our interview, ‘acknowledge beauty, acknowledge the importance of beauty, acknowledge the importance of fun, and acknowledge the importance of quality. I’m of the generation where we were all ‘workers’ for a long time, none of us were allowed to be artists[...] Yes, Art. Yes, the “A” word’.¹¹³ I argue here that ACT NOW similarly creates *sentient* coalescence, not just through political persuasion or enhanced participation, but also by raising consciousness through sharing the making of an aesthetic act.

¹¹⁰ Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965), 53-54.

¹¹¹ Dewey quoted in Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meaning* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 36

¹¹² Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 198.

¹¹³ Adrian Jackson, Interview, 2011

To reconnect with the animation of effect that is drawn through this thesis, James Thompson argues that a fundamental question to consider for applied theatre, is not just whether it has *effected change* but whether it has caused an *affective* response. For Thompson, to collaborate in something beautiful is the point of departure towards change, without ever being a ‘departure from a sense of purpose or political ambition’.¹¹⁴ Anthony Jackson describes as ‘the tension between theatre’s aesthetic dimension and the ‘utilitarian’ or ‘instrumental’ role for which it has so often been pressed into service’.¹¹⁵ In *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, Boal argues for a collapse of the binary that Richard Schechner perceives in his original separation of ‘aesthetic theatre’ from ‘social theatre’ with an instrumental purpose, where ‘aesthetics is not the ruling objective’.¹¹⁶ For Boal, at the end of his career, the artistic and the instrumental are ‘interdependent’ and, ‘theatre that aims to educate or influence can truly do so only if it values entertainment, the artistry and craftsmanship that are associated with resonant, powerful theatre, and the aesthetic qualities that – by definition – will appeal to our senses’.¹¹⁷ In *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, Boal promotes the ‘amplificatory social power’ of the aesthetic process which brings recognition and status for its makers, especially for those who have been hitherto locked out of full participation in a cultural life.¹¹⁸ The work of art, continues Boal, ‘must be capable of awakening, even in those who did not participate in the Aesthetic Process by which it came into being, the same ideas, emotions and thoughts that led the artist to its creation’.¹¹⁹ What interests me here is the alignment to the human rights theatre paradigm that a ‘work of art’ is capable of ‘awakening’ a response in others, in participants and audience alike, and the transformation it

¹¹⁴ Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect*, 130.

¹¹⁵ Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meaning*, 1.

¹¹⁶ Schechner and Thompson, cited in Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meaning*, 26.

¹¹⁷ Anthony Jackson, *Theatre, Education and the Making of Meaning*, 27-28.

¹¹⁸ Augusto Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, translated by Adrian Jackson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18

enables in the audience from awareness to a deeper awakening to a consciousness of wider ethico-political structures.

McBride clearly believes there is aesthetic value and traction to be found in the community participatory work of ACT NOW. In our interview he consistently emphasised the artistic ‘uplift’ built into ACT NOW, and its power to ‘excite’ and ‘engage’ by fostering a ‘free creative space’.¹²⁰ McBride reported that for many participants the programme’s appeal was rooted in the enticing possibility of making a ‘work of art’ and taking on the identity of ‘artist’, especially for those of ‘zero’ status, the ‘Not’ in the NEET category: ‘We know that the hook is the theatre’, he smiled, ‘that’s the attractor’.¹²¹ For Nicholson, it is aestheticised and creative events that facilitate ‘participants to move out of restricted spaces’, enabling people to ‘move beyond the ordinary and everyday’.¹²² The creative act makes space for a more intricate engagement with the narratives of the participants; the acquisition and mastery of theatre-making skills and vocabularies among participants allows their stories to be heard in attentive and reflective public settings where they are recognised as rights-holders. As Nicholson indicates, transcendence from the ordinary can provide the magnification necessary for self-expression. From meeting and observing several members of the ACT NOW cohorts, it is clear many participants have little difficulty in communicating something about their status, their past lives, and their opinions about their political and structural position. But it is the enactment of stepping inside the arts event of ACT NOW, curated, and structured, also open to free expression that gives these participants a creative channel for their ideas. The aesthetic and technical processes in the ACT NOW programme is designed to guide members from a dissatisfied abundance of words to the rhythms of metered poetry

¹²⁰ McBride, Interview, 2011.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Nicholson, *Applied Drama*, 129.

which has the capacity to engage an audience through cognisable story-arcs. I suggest being given the tools of artistic expression to aestheticise their thoughts, and an understanding of the mechanics of affect the theatre space can provide, ACT NOW participants are also given freedom of expression. They are encouraged to be playful and subversive and to problematise preconceptions of their identity and their oppressed place in society. Furthermore, it is in their engagement with the reflexive and collective processes of Boal's dialectical theatre-making – in all its forms – those participants are able develop the tools necessary for rights-claiming and redress. In another interview, ACT NOW member Terry Sheehan articulates the effect of creativity and artistry in altering his own perception of his life choices: 'I try to show people today what people can do from having a bad lifestyle, and build up their selves and to become, or try to do something more creative, more artistic like this, and something that will get you far in life'.¹²³ This, then, is human rights theatre facilitated and performed as rights-capacity building by Cardboard Citizens. Participants may – or may not – realise a goal of 'getting far in life', but for Sheehan, this was concrete, his relationship with the company redirecting his path back to reclaiming ownership of his economic, social, and cultural rights.

Conclusion

ACT NOW operates a human rights theatre through the content of their programme, and via the participatory modes embedded in the making and delivery of their theatre. The complexity and dissension around homelessness and poverty as human rights issues directs Cardboard Citizens and the members of ACT NOW to construct aesthetic frameworks that facilitate polyvocal responses, sensual affect and metacritique of structural rights denial. The

¹²³ Terry Sheehan, 'Up on the Roof, by ACT NOW, Carboard Citizens', 05 January 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf6C7T7dJDI>.

aim of ACT NOW is to strategically use participation to simultaneously disaggregate the stereotypes that agglomerate homeless people as unworthy of rights, whilst building communal solidarity amongst all strata of participants via theatre that engenders collective consciousness. I argue in this section that the terminology of professionalism and ‘hard work’ within the artistic endeavours of ACT NOW might replicate the ‘corporate interests of the economic class’ and a dislocation from a historical understanding of the locus of power.¹²⁴ However, I also note the making methodology of devising from personal narratives permits individuation within the work and the facilitation of bespoke needs – for the participants to be understood through the process. I sound a note of caution on the extraction and exploitation of autobiography in young people’s theatre, but also recognise this as a multiplier of *sentience*, where lived experience is expressed through poetry, film, animation, song, and scene to amplify points of shared resonance. The use of Forum Theatre in ACT NOW projects widens out participation to members of the audience, asking them to (corporeally and imaginatively) ‘step into another person’s shoes’, performing within a dynamic dialectical scene to simulate the breaking of oppression. Questions around embodied participation as a process for achieving *sentience* to raise consciousness within a human rights theatre are further explored in the second part of the chapter in my discussion of Tony Cealy’s work with the Black Men’s Consortium.

¹²⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebook*, 170.

PART 2: The Black Men's Consortium

Introduction

The second half of this chapter on participatory modes in human rights theatre is dedicated to the work of Tony Cealy. I focus on his work on men's mental health, and his establishment of the Black Men's Consortium 'to explore stuckness, injustices, and inequalities that Black Men experience in their everyday lives'.¹ This section continues the exploration of the impact of Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) on the applied theatre/community theatre ecology in the UK, but crucially, emphasises additions, amendments and hybridisations which occur in Cealy's modified mesolect practice, and gestures towards other methodologies and technologies that mark his work out as distinct. I argue here these adaptations connect Cealy to a contemporary international practice of TO that recentres the global majority, and where 'creative heresy' is purposefully committed to be responsive to community needs. I also emphasise how this has resonance for Black radical politics in the UK context, offering a more subtle handling of the argued and abstruse corpus of Economic Social and Cultural human rights.² The case-study of the evolving *Jo/Kwame* plays continues to explore the way cultural participation programmes are designed to both embed and embody rights through developing increased agency. As per the questions of homelessness, poverty, and education examined in the first part of this chapter, I make claims for mental health as a human rights issue in my stated human rights theatre framework highlighting the role of the state in endangering its citizens; reflecting on the lack of provision of adequate

¹ The Black Men's Consortium, 'Research', April 2021, <http://theblackmensconsortium.com/research/> accessed July 2021.

² Though, throughout this discussion, I highlight how the infringement of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) human rights, or the derelictions to uphold these rights, can quickly draw in Civil and Political (CPR) human rights over personal liberty, detention, and discrimination.

services, discrimination at points of access, and biases towards detention. In focussing primarily on Cealy's Forum Theatre practice with the Black Men's Consortium (BMC), I also ensure the 'problem play' dramaturgy of this form aligns with the principles of my examination of theatre pieces where moral and ethical ruptures are encountered within the play and extra-dramatically through playing out of victim/perpetrator dynamics. I also give considerable weight in this part of the chapter to what happens in the 'forum' sections of Cealy's pieces.³ This focus enables me to address the third criterion of my proposed human rights theatre framework. I suggest the performance seeks to have an activist effect on the collective behaviours of the audience, prompting them to adjust their lived responses post event. In seeing the Forum activity (both on stage and off) through the lens of Boal's 'rehearsal for revolution', I examine intentional transmissibility whilst also challenging the instrumentality of impact-focussed approaches. Furthermore, I map the longevity of Cealy's work on Black men's mental health to examine ideas of 'deep facilitation' for groups with fluctuating memberships.⁴ This part of the chapter also concludes the examination of consciousness in human rights theatre, looking towards the *sentience*/felt-understanding of embodying another character, playing from 'another person's shoes' to come to consciousness of infringements to other's rights, or rights you might claim. Moreover, this final section of the thesis amplifies my exploration of human rights theatre as the making of political consciousness. Drawing on Franz Fanon's use of the term 'conscienciser' in his 1952 book, *Black Skins, White Masks*, I return to Freire's 'conscientization' to now arrive at Black Consciousness as a distinct radical ideology that identified white racism, and Black acquiescence to that brutalising prejudice, as the site of the problem, rejecting white liberalism as an insidious form of control, instead looking towards solidarity between Black

³ Forum when capitalised commonly refers to the entirety of the Forum Theatre event, whereas conventionally the participation and discussion session after the model is played is styled as forum, in lower case.

⁴ Sheila Preston, *Facilitation: Pedagogies, Practices, Resilience* (London: Methuen Drama, 2016), 37.

groups.⁵ We find echoes of this in Cealy's work with BMC, dovetailing with anti-apartheid campaigner Steve Biko's argument that without a positive, creative sense of self, Black people would not challenge the status quo, 'the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed'.⁶ I acknowledge I write about Cealy's work as a white researcher and therefore am aware of my exogenous status at precisely the point of talking about close participatory work and endogenous community. However, my research methodology in this section, through observation of practice and personal interviews, with concentration on performance moments offered as critical readings, dovetailed with writings from Boal, and recourse to theoretical contributions from applied theatre researchers working in this area, provides an illuminating lens on Cealy's practice and its contribution to developing *sentient*, felt-understandings of human rights.

Tony Cealy: An Improvised Facilitator

Cealy was en route to becoming a fully-fledged accountant in the city when he discovered his love for drama. Growing up in difficult circumstances, he had been the success story of the family; covering the rent with his 'respectable' job, wearing a suit and tie. Dulled by the rigidity of his 9-5 office job, he decided to take a night-class at Lambeth College -

⁵ The Black Consciousness movement of South Africa instigated a social, cultural, and political awakening in the country in the 1970s. The movement emanated from multiple sources of Black scholarship, including Franz Fanon's analysis of the psychological impact of colonialism, K. K. Kaunda's African humanism, and Julius Nyerere's version of African socialism that emphasised self-reliance and development for liberation. This philosophy redefined "black" as an inclusive, positive identity and taught that black South Africans could make meaningful change in their society if "conscientized" or awakened to their self-worth and the need for activism. As part of a global evolution of the movement, the BCM was active in the UK from the early 1980s, with scholars such as Jenni Ramone tracing the impact of Black Consciousness on UK communities and concomitant literary expression from Black writers. Though there are profound links here with other radical movements such as Black Power in the US, including the raised fist gesture adopted by the South African Black Consciousness movement, Black Consciousness retained greater links to Marxist thought, and the philosophy of liberation that found traction in South America in the 1960s. I use this as my linkage here to Boal and to Freire's conscientization.

⁶ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Randburg, South Africa: Ravan Press, 1996), 68.

‘something quite light and easy because [he] didn’t want to do anything too taxing after work’.⁷ When the College suggested drama to him, Cealy initially refused, remembering humiliating school lessons where his teacher physically abused the Black African and Caribbean students for not being able to get their ‘lips around the words of Shakespeare’.⁸ It was the idea of improvisation that finally appealed to Cealy, with its endless possibilities, and new directions, new worlds to step into and offers of (re)invention. His talent encouraged, he began performing in plays at the Oval House – ‘when I was a teenager, I broke in there and stole a cassette recorder, so I knew all about that place’⁹ – which set a pathway for a professional acting career. For Cealy, taking a workshop with Augusto Boal in the early nineties was a means to an end (‘he was just like any other practitioner. I’d no idea who he was’¹⁰), to generate new practices to complement his acquired training in clowning, *commedia dell’arte*, in Meisner techniques and in improvisation, intentionally ‘picking up tools to put into my rucksack’.¹¹ He did not want to follow a monotheistic system of practice, ‘because I don’t like to do something that has got a recipe’ he explained in our interview, ‘to be told “this is how you do it is how you’re meant to do it”. I don’t like being held in a box’.¹² Cealy recalls that initially Boal’s practice had little impact on him. Cealy was more invested in the methods of luminary practitioners, John Wright and Keith Johnstone, who inculcated in him a pleasure in risk and a sense of playfulness, a disruptive and subversive political potential which he returned to in his artistic leadership of The Black Men’s Consortium.¹³

⁷ Tony Cealy, ‘Tony Cealy: Black Men’s Consortium, Interview by Annecy Lax,’ May 2021.

⁸ Tony Cealy, Interview, 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ More about John Wright can be found in his books *Why is That So Funny* (2015) and *Playing the Mask* (2017) and Keith Johnstone’s seminal work, *Impro* first published in 1979 and *Impro for Storytellers* (1999).

In our interview, Cealy reports he initially ‘refused the call’ to work in applied and community settings: ‘I thought, “me? Go and work in those kinds of places, with those kinds of people”, are you mad? I want my name in lights’.¹⁴ However, periods of unemployment meant he began to join other practitioners and friends in delivering workshops. Cealy refined his craft as a facilitator over a 30-year career, but recalled his initial practice was authoritative, regulatory, and in thrall to theatrical convention; trying to train the participants to be ‘proper actors’, not to meet them in their place or within their problems.¹⁵ Although Cealy immediately recognised the potential in Boal’s system of exercises for groups, he shared a common experience with several theatre facilitators (including Adrian Jackson) in finding Boal’s writings could be dense and elliptical, disclosing that, ‘I took the ‘Rainbow of Desire’ course, and it completely didn’t make any sense to me’.¹⁶ It was only gradually the potentiality of TO and Forum Theatre coalesced for Cealy. Collaborating with Andy Hickson of Actionwork, he realised it was a ‘very powerful tool to work with communities, because seeing the impact with young people and in prisons, I felt I could make some headway and start to work with my own community, particularly Black communities, back home in London’.¹⁷ The discovery of this practice also drew him into contact with the international TO community, where he encountered more heterogeneous practitioners from the Global South.¹⁸ These artists complicated the white custodianship of Boal’s practice in the Global North, and simultaneously connected Cealy to a wider network of global impact and efficacy in meeting oppression. These meetings also cautioned against a devotional relationship to Boal, explored later in this chapter, where TO practice is treated as though ‘fixed’. From these formative experiences, Cealy has built a body of work titled, ‘Community Dialogue and

¹⁴ Tony Cealy, Interview, 2021.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Practitioners mentioned in our discussions were Geo Britto (Brazil), Hector Aristizabal (Colombia), Sanjoy Ganguly (Kolkata) and Barbara Santos (Brazil).

Transformations’ to explore how community interventions can provide ‘insight and incite action’ for health and wellbeing, mental health, social care, education, substance misuse, housing and regeneration, youth services and community development across the UK.¹⁹ Cealy’s projects- such as ‘Breaking Barriers’ and ‘Beyond Resistance’- centre approaches for behavioural change, developing pro-social skills and increasing self-esteem. He regularly delivers training to professionals across the UK, Europe, the US, and Africa who work with at-risk or vulnerable people. Cealy encapsulates his current work as being ‘in community “hotspots” with BAME groups on issues of conflict and reconciliation’.²⁰ Cealy’s work makes connections to the recognition of the inalienable rights of others that form the basis of the human rights movement, with Cealy aspiring towards a human rights theatre that ‘brings together members of hostile communities... finding ways for them to recognise their rights, their shared humanity and start to communicate’.²¹

Racism, Mental Health, and Human Rights

The focus of the second part of this chapter is Cealy’s sustained work with Black men’s mental health, addressing the high rates of mental health problems in men; a situation exacerbated by race, where Black men are far more likely than others to be diagnosed with severe mental health problems.²² Black men are also far more likely to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act, stigmatised for displaying certain behaviours, and where conduct is more likely to be read as threatening and aggressive.²³ The International Covenant on

¹⁹ Tony Cealy ‘Arts Practitioner Trainer Producer’, accessed January 1, 2020, <http://www.tonycealy.com>

²⁰ Tony Cealy, Interview, 2021.

²¹ Ibid.

²² CALM: Campaign Against Living Miserably, *Ten years of CALM: 2015-16 Impact Report* (London: CALM: Campaign Against Living Miserably, 2016).

²³ A considerable body of evidence exists which demonstrates poor experiences and outcomes within African and Caribbean communities in relation to mental health. For example, detention rates under the Mental Health Act recorded during 2012 were 2.2 times higher for people of African origin and 4.2 times higher for those of

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is a fundamental human right indispensable for the exercise of other human rights.²⁴ Health is foregrounded in the establishing documents of the World Health Organisation as a state of ‘complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.²⁵ This holistic definition is intended to challenge the old dichotomies of body/mind and physical/psychic; it is also a pragmatic one, insofar as it incorporates a social dimension into medicine.²⁶ Furthermore, the WHO defines mental health as ‘a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’,²⁷ aligning with Boal’s ideas expressed in ‘The Rainbow of Desire’ work that participation within civil and political life depends upon full self-realisation. The Rainbow of Desire practice was Boal’s response to his European exile where he found the Forum models were not about ‘strikes, shortages of water, hunger and violence’.²⁸ His initial confusion at finding no ‘cop’ present in the enactments of oppression, transformed into a search for the ‘cop in the head’ that gives rise to ‘a species of oppression not discussed in Latin America: isolation, emptiness, lack of communication’.²⁹ Boal pointed to the high number of suicides in the Global North as reason for this re-reading of oppression

Caribbean origin than the average, and ‘in a survey commissioned by Time to Change of people from minority ethnic groups with mental health problems, 28% of Black Caribbean and 31% of African respondents reported that they had directly experienced racism within services during the preceding 12 months.’ Time to Change: Mind UK, ‘300 Voices Toolkit: Better must come: Towards hope’, (London: Time to Change, 2016), 10.

²⁴ The relationship between mental health and human rights is a more complex one than enshrining the right to good mental health. For instance, human rights violations such as torture and displacement negatively affect mental health. Mental health practices, programs, and laws, such as coercive treatment practices, can hinder human rights. The American Psychological Association also contends that the general advancement of human rights benefits mental health: See: Asanbe, C., Gaba, A., & Yang, J. “Mental health is a human right”. *Psychology International*. (2018, December). <http://www.apa.org/international/pi/2018/12/mental-health-rights>

²⁵ Frank Grad, ‘The Preamble of the Constitution of the World Health Organization,’ *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 80, no.12 (2002): 981-984.

²⁶ Jose Bertolote, ‘The roots of the concept of mental health,’ *World Psychiatry* 7, no.2 (2008): 113-116.

²⁷ WHO, ‘Strengthening mental health promotion: Fact sheet,’ No. 220 (World Health Organisation, 2001).

²⁸ Augusto Boal, *Hamlet and The Baker's Son: My Life in Theatre and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 324.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 324. In the graffiti on the walls around Paris in May 1968 were the phrases, ‘Drive the cop out of your head’ and ‘A cop sleeps inside each one of us. We must kill him’.

as ‘societal values [...] that obstruct our wills and foster passivity’.³⁰ As Babbage notes, ‘the implication was that the old oppressors associated with the dictatorships were not absent from this context of relative privilege, but were operating undercover, subtly and internally’, moving the perimeters of the battlefield from locational to psychic.³¹ Indeed, the UN Special Rapporteur on health reported that ‘(d)espite clear evidence that there can be no health without mental health, nowhere in the world does mental health enjoy parity with physical health in national policies and budgets or in medical education and practice’.³² Accordingly, the Human Rights Council recognised persons with psychosocial disabilities, persons with mental health conditions, and mental health users face widespread discrimination, stigma, prejudice, violence, abuse, social exclusion, and segregation, unlawful or arbitrary institutionalisation, over-medicalisation and treatment practices that fail to respect their autonomy, will and preferences.³³ However, as a persistent thread through the human rights story, there is a fissure between UN recognition and resolution, and the implementation of social structures and services which annul these disparities, meaning that Black men still retain a uniquely vulnerable position as to the enactment of human rights over their mental health.³⁴

³⁰ Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Playing Boal: Theatre, therapy, Activism* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4. - ‘Then I found out that in countries like Sweden and Finland where the main social problems have been solved-like education, social security, minimum wages, housing-the suicide rate is much higher than in Brazil where people die of starvation or from being murdered by the police. If a person prefers to die she must be suffering terribly. The oppression is different, but the death is just as final. So I started caring more about internal oppression’. See: Jan Cohen-Cruz, ‘Boal at NYU: A Workshop and Its Aftermath,’ *TDR* (The Drama Review) (The MIT Press) 34:3 (1990), 44.

³¹ Babbage, *Augusto Boal*, 24.

³² Dainius Pūras, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health,’ (New York: Human Rights Council, United Nations, 2017).

³³ Human Rights Council Resolution, adopted by the Human Rights Council on 28 September 2017 (New York: United Nations, 2017).

³⁴ The UK Human Rights Act recognises that a person cannot be discriminated against, but largely covers ameliorative rights once under medical treatment, hospitalisation or incarceration and that service providers must comply with human rights, for example, to privacy, fair detention, and lack of torture. See: W Leung, ‘Human Rights Act 1998 and mental health legislation: implications for the management of mentally ill patients,’ *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 2002; 78: 178-181.

These Resolutions and Acts do not consider reasonable access and adequate provision at the point of curative need, or suggest sustained solutions, or preventative options. That this becomes a place for artistic intervention is not surprising: it comes in partial recognition of the easy purchase of adjacent solutions that deflect away from lack of clinical resource, but also in acknowledgement of art therapy traditions in areas of mental health. Cealy not only uses Rainbow of Desire, Forum Theatre and wider TO techniques in his work, but also draws upon sociodrama, and here we might remember Jacob Moreno's cautionary note not to elide theatre processes with formal therapeutic ones, advocating instead for their potential relationship: 'there will be a theatre that is pure therapy, there will be a theatre which is free from therapeutic objectives, and then there will be many intermediary forms'.³⁵ The Rainbow of Desire method attempts to access an affective dimension where people can project their memories and experiences onto the aesthetic space, in a revelatory dialogue with the unconscious. Rainbow of Desire techniques draw the group around the individual, in some exercises each player characterises auxiliary egos performing an aspect of the externalised parts of the psyche, here working towards a collective consciousness. Whether the subject perceives themselves as a member of a society, or as a cog in the machine, one of the markers of consciousness is our ability to perceive being *inside* a system.³⁶ Moreover, Boal argued there was a relationship between being conscientized to a 'cop in the head' and the ability to engage in more concrete political action, advocating that 'it is necessary to locate both the cops and their headquarters',³⁷ the internal and external where the 'osmosis'

³⁵ Jacob Moreno quoted in Daniel Feldhender, 'Augusto Boal and Jacob L. Moreno,' in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*, Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz (London: Routledge, 1994) 93.

³⁶ David Miller, 'The Individual as a "Cog" in a Machine or in a System,' *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1965): 297-308.

³⁷ Augusto Boal and Susana Epstein, 'Invisible Theatre: Liege, Belgium, 1978,' *TDR (The Drama Review)* The MIT Press, 34, no. 3 (1990): 35. - 'There are people who dare not participate in a strike or other political actions. Why? They have cops in their heads. They have internalized their oppression'. Augusto Boal and Susana Epstein, 'The Cop in the Head: Three Hypotheses,' *TDR (The Drama Review)* (The MIT Press) 34, no. 3 (Autumn, 1990): 35-42.

between the microcosm and macrocosm is made explicit.³⁸ Though Boal never lost sight of the political efficacy of Forum as a theatre tool adroit in to tackling the materially urgent conditions for the oppressed, there was also the need to ‘live expansively’, not as though ‘under arrest inside ourselves’.³⁹ Cealy’s workshop in 2019 at the Nation of Islam European Headquarters was entitled ‘Oppression: The Fight Back’ and deployed Rainbow of Desire techniques to activate ‘the power of theatre to look at the inner oppressions we carry within us’.⁴⁰ Here Cealy was working with Boal’s physical processes of ‘demechanisation’,⁴¹ a strategy of creativity and playfulness as preparation for political activism, and in an appeal for the radical efficacy of *sentience*, of ‘getting in touch with their senses [...] because if we are going to move forward as a collective, and we are going to change things in our community, then we need to know how we feel about each other’.⁴²

Beyond the formalised psychological processes and setting of dramatherapy and Moreno’s psychodrama, the efficacy of expressive and creative activities is well documented in addressing mental health issues. Anna Harpin identifies artistic practice as particularly well suited to this work, gesturing to the alternative potential to contemporary pharma-psychiatry, as art is open-ended, relational, and dimensional within wider intertextual practice. In line with my conceptualisation of *sentience*, she argues art is a ‘feeling encounter’ and is ‘a communicative act that is less concerned with making experience and articulation synonymous, and more concerned with unfolding feeling gestures of living’.⁴³ In the context of assessing Cealy’s work, we can perhaps find a connection here between Harpin’s

³⁸ Boal, *Rainbow of Desire*, 40.

³⁹ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 2.

⁴⁰ Tony Cealy, ‘Oppression: The Fightback Training,’ 22 October. Accessed January 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CHLByxfJbo>.

⁴¹ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 30.

⁴² Cealy, ‘Oppression: The Fightback Training,’ 22 October.

⁴³ Anna Harpin, *Madness, Art and Society: Beyond Illness* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 6.

designation of a relational and dimensional practice, and Boal's assertion of the appositeness of the simultaneity of the *is/is not* of aesthetic space to study the human condition as a site of plasticity, dichotomy, and telemicroscopy.⁴⁴ In a retrieval of the word 'madness' as a state of mind that moves outside conventional and permitted thinking, Harpin contends, 'art illuminates the generative capacity of madness and helps us to understand its manifestations as acts of political expression'.⁴⁵ Here I am interested in Harpin's connection between the *sentient* 'feeling encounter' of art as a route to the political; between the aesthetic *mise-en-scène* of mental health crisis, and a deeper political understanding of the stressors upon life that can cause disenfranchisement from the wider community, and from a full realisation and reclamation of human rights. I now turn to issues of mental health and racism within Cealy's practice and do so with reference to a case-study of The Black Men's Consortium, leading to the first production of *Kwame and The Lockdown* in April 2020.

Beginnings of Black Men's Consortium

Over a two-year period Cealy has been working specifically on drama workshops for older Black men, and for Black men's mental health and wellbeing; initially a commission from the Lambeth Wellbeing Fund, but then developing into a more self-sustaining project managed by Cealy under the designation The Black Men's Consortium (BMC).⁴⁶ A name signalling a shared and democratic endeavour. For Cealy, this is urgent work in which the need to 'punch' out the message that Black men's mental health and propensity towards suicide is a political

⁴⁴ Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, 20-27.

⁴⁵ Harpin, *Madness, Art and Society*, 2

⁴⁶ Alongside commission funding from South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, Healthwatch and Lambeth Community Foundation, but also supported through the Solution Room, a community group serving African/Caribbean socio-economic advancement through exceptionalism. I note this to show the complexity of launching and sustaining this work and to signal the involvement of Black community organisations involved in setting up these projects.

issue.⁴⁷ ‘Black men, our men, are dying out there and I need you to help me do something about it’⁴⁸, he implores straight to camera in a video advertising for workshop participants. The group was constructed under the call-out for ‘men 50+ experiencing loneliness, isolation and mental health concerns’, collecting in late March 2019 for weekly sessions.⁴⁹ The group started with three white male participants, but only one remained in the process up until his final performance at West Norwood Library in the summer of 2019. By the autumn the project became almost exclusively for Black men, generating – permitting – a space to talk about the politics of being Black in the UK, the responsabilisation of multicultural harmonisation, and the lived experiences of racism. The motto of the Consortium is ‘as of today, I have no problems with other black men... My goal is not to hurt or harm you but support and uplift you. We have enough enemies. Be safe out there black man’.⁵⁰

Cealy’s work on mental health tapers to focus on Black men through several significant socio-political events in the UK that test the national rights conscience and the upholding of the UK Human Rights Act. The cluster of these events represents a return to ‘older’ human rights concerns of equality of rights, equality before the law, of ‘race’ and ‘colour’, of freedom from persecution and rights to nationality, the fundamental civil and political rights many have taken for granted as inviolate in the UK.⁵¹ The first is the Windrush Scandal of 2018 which began to crack apart previously understood social contracts,

⁴⁷ Cealy, Interview, 2021

⁴⁸ Tony Cealy, ‘Mental Health Performance Project,’ 09 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atlxrRT-nhs>

⁴⁹ Tony Cealy. ‘Oldermensdrama film’, 24th August, 2019, accessed January 01, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUXVR7qVQy4>.

⁵⁰ The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Home’, April 2021, <http://theblackmensconsortium.com/projects/>

⁵¹ I use the word ‘colour’ here with some caution because of the ways in which this term has allowed white societies to other and homogenise in contrast to the dominant group. The term has the potential to collapse all discriminatory experience without considering the impacts to specific ethnic and cultural identities. I include it because it is the term used in the UDHR and in acknowledgement of the shared common experiences of systemic racism. Furthermore, to highlight the visual signals of difference that impact, for example, policing decisions.

when 57,000 Commonwealth migrants were subjected to the ‘inhumane’ reach of the Home Office’s hostile environment policy. Black British subjects, members of the ‘Windrush generation’ who arrived in the UK before 1973, had their human rights compromised when they were denied benefits, medical care, losing their jobs and passports, and many put in detention. The Equality and Human Rights Commission ruled that the UK Government had broken the law in the application of policies that disproportionately targeted Black citizens.⁵² In March of 2019 when the Older Men’s Drama project is in its infancy, one of the older participants attests:

The Black community needs this. The Black men, a lot of them are frustrated as they’ve been here a long time since the 1950s. They’ve given their all and they haven’t had their dues from the Government. Now they are retired, and they are wasted. They don’t know what to do. At last, we’ve created something for them.⁵³

The second factor is the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement of 2020.⁵⁴ The first BLM UK chapters failed to gain much traction in 2015/2016 in the glare of media hostility and a populist implication there was insufficient racism in the UK to warrant protests. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 meant ‘the once blurred reality of Black people’s experiences had become too blatant to ignore’ with BLM UK reintroduced as a ‘human rights concern for revolutionary change’.⁵⁵ The third influence is the 40th anniversary of the 1981 Brixton uprising— a primal scene for a 15-year-old Cealy and the

⁵² Amelia Gentleman, ‘Home Office broke equalities law with hostile environment measures,’ *The Guardian*, 25 November, 2020.

⁵³ Cealy. ‘Oldermensdrama film’, 24th August, 2019, accessed January 01, 2020.

⁵⁴ The original Black Lives Matter movement was founded in the US in 2013 by three Black women, and I alight on this to emphasise the gender of the activism - Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi - in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012. See: Patricia Francis, ‘Black Lives Matter: how the UK movement struggled to be heard in the 2010s,’ *The Conversation*, 7 June 2021.

⁵⁵ Francis, ‘Black Lives Matter,’ 2021. The fuller statement references human rights again, ‘BLACK LIVES MATTER We stand together in solidarity across the globe to change the world, we kneel together for peace and unities asserting Black people are treated as humanely and fairly as White people. It is a human right to receive racial equality, social and criminal justice in the societies we live and share, and to receive parity as full citizens of the country and as a nation’. See: Black Lives Matter UK, ‘Join the Revolution: Black Lives Matter,’ accessed January 01, 2021, <https://blacklivesmatter.uk>.

ignition for a radical community politics, culminating with his 2021 project ‘81 Acts of Exuberant Defiance’.⁵⁶ ‘I remember, when I was 15’, Cealy offers, ‘I was flunking out of school, going back to Brixton and picking up, you know, a petrol bomb in front of the police and throwing it back’.⁵⁷ The title of the project is not purely in homage to the dates of the uprisings, but also as creative retort to ‘Operation Swamp 81’, the Metropolitan Police’s overt use of ‘Sus laws’ to police Black youths, named after then prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s 1978 claims the UK ‘might be rather swamped by people from a different culture’.⁵⁸ The subsequent Scarman Report of 1981 acknowledged the disproportionate contravention of Black people’s human rights, but had largely been disregarded by the time the McPherson Report of 1997 investigated policing failures connected to the murder of Stephen Lawrence. These and thousands of other micro and macro injustices that Cealy reports experiencing have shaped his ethico-political and community focus,⁵⁹ ‘where I am today’ he asserts, it’s all about the radical reclaiming of heritage, not forgetting, but moving forward’.⁶⁰ In thinking about Cealy’s commitment to ‘moving forward’, I now move to detail and analyse the progressive iterations of the ‘*Kwame*’ plays, exploring the representation, political and ethical questions raised.

⁵⁶ Tony Cealy, ‘40th Anniversary of the 1981 Brixton Uprising’, 11 April 2021, accessed May 01, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tYGwEKu2AU>

⁵⁷ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

⁵⁸ The Runnymede Trust, ‘The Struggle for Race Equality: Margaret Thatcher Claims Britons Fear Being ‘Swamped,’ accessed Jan 01, 2020, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/histories/race-equality/59/margaret-thatcher-claims-britons-fear-being-swamped.html>.

⁵⁹ Cealy expressed the feeling of being ‘thrown under the bus’ by ‘Tony Sewage’ after the publication of the report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities by Dr Tony Sewell CBE, Commission chair. The report, published at the end of March 2021, caused controversy both by stressing ethnic minority success and challenging notions of ethnic group differences being mainly shaped by majority racism. The reactions to the report from equality groups and Black British citizens was one of disbelief and a sense of betrayal (see The Women and Equalities Committee 2021).

⁶⁰ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

Making ‘Jo’, Finding ‘Kwame’

In the Older Men’s Drama Performance staged at Streatham Library, South London on 18th May 2019, we meet what will be a repeating character, Jo (later morphing into Kwame), whose mental health is in severe crisis. We find that Jo is ‘suffering from depression which some people call bipolar’ and that he has ‘good days and bad days’, however the character also reveals that, ‘recently, I’ve had a lot more bad days than good days’.⁶¹ Cealy titles this piece a ‘community theatre play’, but this is quite conventional Forum Theatre, montaging episodes of Jo’s life, early experiences of being bullied at school, neglected by parents, patterns which are then repeated in his workplace and then in his struggle to be heard by mental health professionals. The scenes are centred around a dispute or crisis-point and are generally ‘naturalistic’ in form, with a notable exception towards the close of the 30-minute piece where all the performers externalise Jo’s destructive inner-monologue, playing out the ego of the protagonist, as redolent of Rainbow of Desire techniques. The play ends with Jo taking his own life – in part, the game of the forum, therefore, is to stop Jo committing suicide. The stakes are high in this performance, inviting Jo (and the many forms of Jo he will ‘become’ through the forum) to unravel the coordinates of his past, and to intervene in his present to deescalate his suicidal ideation. But for Cealy this is a necessary community conversation, Jo’s story built on moments and, in parallel to the ACT NOW work, events from the participant group’s autobiographies. The cast for the May 18th performance was comprised of six Black actors with an age range of 40-70 years of age. Jo was played by performer Willian Shombe, rare in that his participation spans from the inception of the group to the formalisation of The Black Men’s Consortium, acknowledging that ‘one of the journeys I’ve had with this group, is that we’ve had such an influx of different people coming

⁶¹ Tony Cealy, ‘Older Men’s Drama Performance, 18th May, 2019,’ accessed Jan 01, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJ8McZorDcc&t=167s>

and going'.⁶² Across the summer of 2019, several performances of Jo's story are given. The script for the model has distinct co-ordinates, but through the different iterations there is also improvisation and variation around the moments of conflict. There are cast changes too, including a playful swapping of the actors playing Jo, two of the stronger performers being given an opportunity to alternate the central role (the other being long-standing member Wayne Chin) – both of whom testify to the ways in which they directly identify with the protagonist in after show discussions. 'We saw Jo in a bit of difficulty', Cealy posits to the audience gathered in a circle at the start of the forum section, 'and you might be able to make a difference, no matter how small, to help Jo have different outcomes'.⁶³ Cealy calls it a 'game', consistent with some of the ludic language that Boal uses around Forum Theatre,⁶⁴ and nudges the gathered spectators with encouraging phrases such as 'try out your idea' and 'have a go, we all want to be entertained!'.⁶⁵ However, there is also provocative steeliness when he appends his invitation by saying, 'but if you don't come up, then you are complicit. You are saying that nothing can be done. And these things that you've witnessed tonight will continue and continue'.⁶⁶

The criticism of Forum Theatre is that in reaching towards a 'social mission' it creates a 'desire for functionality and efficacy' that neutralises 'art's capacity to remain outside the instrumentalist perceptions of the social'.⁶⁷ Bishop finds a similar tension in the work of Boal, where 'inevitably, this redirects theatre towards education rather than entertainment', having a 'constructive impact on the audience, rather than eliciting emotional responses to

⁶² Cealy, 'The Black Men's Consortium performance at the Listen 'Mental Health' Festival,' accessed June 16 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn00DmVqtHk>

⁶³ Cealy, 'Older Men's Drama Performance, 18th May, 2019.'

⁶⁴ Mady Schutzman, 'JOK(ER)ING: Joker runs wild,' in *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics*, edited by Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman (Oxford : Routledge, 2006), 133.

⁶⁵ Cealy, 'Older Men's Drama Performance, 18th May, 2019.'

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 48.

the representation'.⁶⁸ At the same time, 'Boal is meticulous in considering the affective impact of this technique' and seeks to 'trigger in the viewer a desire'.⁶⁹ However, here we find Cealy's Forum – like most Forum Theatre – not divided between categories of social celebration and social antagonism, but walking the *æffect* line between them.⁷⁰ The participation of the spect-actor bringing autonomy, illegibility and with antagonistic boundaries within and without the performance. The work of Forum converts the impulse of 'desire' to action that privileges affective impact, animating moments of *sentience*. At the Streatham Library performance when Cealy asks the cast to replay the scene where child-Jo is being bullied on the basketball court, the first person to stop the scene is Maureen, a smiling and friendly middle-aged woman. The scene restarts and as the bullies take over the game, the woman dashes at them furiously, kicking the oppressors in the shins. The room erupts with big exclamations of 'Yes!', the cast are collapsing into each other with hard laughter, and the audience are applauding.⁷¹ Corporeal violence is not what applied theatre is supposed to endorse. As noted above, Forum Theatre can often privilege discursive solutions as a method for success; where if we can just calmly explain our position with articulacy, then we will persuade towards change. Placing a premium on rhetorical dexterity can dispossess those – of all races and cultures – who are not enculturated in authorised arguing or who reject supremacist sanctioned discourses and can be at the detriment of valuing *sensible* physical action.

Next a man named Sean gets up, and as Jo tries to argue the bullies down, the scene descends into taunting and yelling with the actors refusing to give way. Jo/Sean is losing,

⁶⁸ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 124.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Cealy, "Older Men's Drama Performance, 18th May, 2019"

getting pushed, resorting to explosive shouts, before he is joined on stage by another member of the audience as Jo's 'friend' who asserts his physical dominance. The men are strangers to each other, but the vulnerability of Sean/Jo provokes this disruption of the rules and of the frame.⁷² As Gareth White argues, Forum Theatre can revolve on its own axis of 'restricted ranges of action', but can also create unplanned ruptures that subvert 'morally sanctioned official understandings'.⁷³ The *affective* power of Forum Theatre has been witnessed. These are arguably (and the room does indeed argue this) the wrong solutions, 'magic' and emotive solutions, but they are driven by a *sentient* response to the predicament of the protagonist. Sean transpires to be a labile and articulate performer and subsequently joins BMC, performing in the second iteration of Jo's story later that year in the winter of 2019. In the act of embodied learning, participation has been democratised, and multiplication occurs.

The story of Jo has changed by the time the group present the work six months later in the early part of 2020; there are echoes of the previous play with scenes of Jo at work, encounters with mental health professionals, battling with multiple 'internal' voices, but in this version, the focus of the play is weighted away from the domestic, to the social structures that systemically oppress Jo and erode his mental health. These new scenes have been developed by the group through the autumn rehearsal period and are more consistent with the corpus of Forum Theatre, locating the oppressors outside of the community group. The scenes are also more formally inventive, more abstracted, and with more humour. The 'work' scene has moved to a mechanistic office and is now almost completely non-verbal. Drawing

⁷² The arrival of Errol then sees the bullies beaten back with a weapon. Though Boal militarises his lexicon around the 'arsenal of the oppressed' and 'theatre as a martial art', saying 'Forum Theatre is a sort of fight or a game', this incident might be read as a doubling of the site of oppression. When pressed on the consequences by Cealy, Errol remarks that Jo 'might end up knifed on the way home, or in a detention centre in five years, but at least he stopped the bullying'. See: Tony Cealy, 'Older Men's Drama Performance, 18th May 2019.'

⁷³ Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 70.

upon Boal's schema of rhythm exercises, the actors only correspond to each other through 'tak, tak, tak' noises.⁷⁴ Jo is reprimanded for bringing in an inventive musical set of cadences, an aestheticised response of 'parables and allegories', which as per Brecht's conceptualisation of *Verfremdungseffekt*, allow the audience to see, 'from a distance, the reality they want to modify – without diminishing their participation in the social concrete world'.⁷⁵ Jo's frustrated encounters with mental health practitioners are headlined by parodic Dickensian denominations, meeting Dr Twenty-Fivemilligrams and Dr IDon'tGiveADamn; this scene also containing politically coruscating lines denouncing the structural racism in healthcare which have an audible impact on the predominantly Black audiences. Jo's childhood experiences are questioned by doctors, because 'you Afro-Caribbean children get beaten quite a lot', and when Jo is asked if he has been 'aggressive lately' by another doctor, the medic then flinches to every small physical movement from Jo, concordant with his perception of antagonistic Black patients. This might remind us of Ahmed's reading of Fanon that 'the fear works through and on the bodies of those who are transformed into its subjects, as well as its objects. The black body is drawn tighter'.⁷⁶ The scene concludes with the physician declaring, 'I'm going to get someone else who is closer to your people'.⁷⁷ The audience whoops and applauds at the satire, at the public announcing/denouncing of this moment. In the final montage Jo is ricocheted around a human pin-ball machine, plagued by a destructive set of inner thoughts, re-generating the admonishments of the other characters in the piece with every contact – 'Jo, I'm your younger brother, stop seeking attention', 'Jo, I'm your mum, stop this, the family loves you', 'Jo, I'm your uncle, you're messing up your life'.⁷⁸ However, I want to note this narrative-based, matrixed dialogue is less politically

⁷⁴ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 92.

⁷⁵ Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, translated by Adrian Jackson (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 40.

⁷⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 63.

⁷⁷ Tony Cealy, 'mental health and suicide performance project (the model) 19 November, 2019,' accessed January 01, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3woJ_T5VZ3A.

⁷⁸ Tony Cealy, 'mental health and suicide performance project (the model) 19 November, 2019,'

radical than the devised rehearsal text: ‘You’re never going to make it / You can’t carry on like this / Fix up yourself man / You can’t trust them / I hate these white people / Kill all these white people, they don’t like us / They want to take our souls’.⁷⁹ It might have been a decision to suit the white comfortability of the funders, or it might have been a distraction from focus on Jo’s interpersonal relationships summarised in the closing scenes, but the links between personally enacted racism, institutional bias and overarching white supremacy on Black men’s mental health were lightened for the public performances.⁸⁰

Participation as Difference in *Jo/Kwame*

White audience members are not particularly visible in the participatory forum sections of the *Jo/Kwame* plays. If they comment, it tends to be from their seats, a quick word from a mental health professional, or social worker in attendance. For some, in acknowledging their outsider-ness, their frictionless ethnic privilege and their tacit reliance on the architecture of racial inequality, accompanies a recognition they have a limited role in offering Jo advice. The scene where Jo is arrested for causing a disturbance is the moment where most Black audience members also refuse to intervene, the *mise-en-scène* polluted with the fraught history of policing in the Black community in London. The fictive architecture here cannot prevent the leakage of an encounter outside the theatre space that would be dangerous to the Black body who behaves, speaks, or moves incorrectly; ‘even when we know our rights’ says one audience member from the side-lines, ‘the police have always behaved that way towards Black men. We need to know our civil rights to defend ourselves against the police’.⁸¹ As

⁷⁹ Tony Cealy, ‘Mental Health and Suicide Performance Project: Rehearsal 05/11/19,’ accessed January 01, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8-JH_bDuNo.

⁸⁰ Ameil J Joseph, Julia Janes, Harjeet Badwall, and Shana Almeida. 2020, ‘Preserving white comfort and safety: the politics of race erasure in academe,’ *Social Identities* 26, no. 2 (2020): 166-185.

⁸¹ Tony Cealy, ‘Mental Health and Suicide Performance 15.02.2020,’ accessed January 01, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbLw_mhdT-M&t=2074s.

discussed in the earlier part of this chapter in relation to the work of Cardboard Citizens, and with a vulnerable constituency that have experienced homelessness, there are problematic power dynamics when (comparatively) wealthy and socially secure ‘do-gooders’ pontificate on behalf of the protagonist without considering the social and cultural multipliers of poverty. For white audience members to take the place of Jo on stage, power disparity is potentially also refracted through cultural appropriation – this could be blackface acting. In his original conceptions of Forum Theatre, Boal held that only spect-actors who are victims of the same oppression as the character can replace them on stage, cautioning that otherwise ‘we manifestly fall into the theatre of advice: one person showing another what to do [...] we have to be oppressed by the same oppression to know what we can really and safely do in a precise situation’.⁸² However, Boal also hints at an appreciation for the intersectionality of oppressions, the same oppression ‘by identity *or analogy*’ he parenthesises, alluding to the portability of experience between sites and situations of oppression. Cealy is more flexible in his application of Boal’s ‘transitive pedagogy and political modality of dialogue’ and the potentiality of the physical exchange of bodies.⁸³ The person, ‘whatever they are, when they step into that role, they have to wear *the mask* of that character,’ he explains in our interview, ‘if you’re playing somebody who is a Black male, or who is unemployed, or whatever it maybe, it is *that mask*, the given circumstances of the character that you are going to play’.⁸⁴ I tell him I am sceptical that as Forum participants we can occupy the space of ‘*whatever they are*’ with our signs and markers of class, or race, or wealth, or cultural references; that we are

⁸² Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors*, 269-270. Augusto Boal described a scene from the United States. ‘A white racist ice-cream parlour owner was happy to sell ice-cream to blacks in the quarter, but he forbade them to eat it in his parlour. Sometimes he even threatened them with a gun. In the audience there were both blacks and whites. One white spect-actor intervened and threw himself on the floor in front of the owner, screaming: ‘If you’ve got a problem, then shoot me!’ The black people in the audience began to laugh. The others asked ‘What’s up?’ ‘What’s funny about that?’ The reply came back like a bullet from a gun: ‘We don’t have to ask to get shot, it happens to us every day.’ See: Birgit Fritz, *InExAct Art - The Autopoietic Theatre of Augusto Boal* (Stuttgart: ibidem press, 2012) 147.

⁸³ Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics* (London: Routledge, 1998), 22.

⁸⁴ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

too marked to occupy the neutral starting point of a ‘whatever’ person. But Cealy maintains his faith in the frame, in the fictive quality emphasised by episodic dramaturgy and the porous dynamics of the form to retain the distinction between the individual participant and the construction of the character:

...at the very least it’s about having a conversation with the person who steps up to say ‘this is the person that you are playing, this is the mask you are going to be wearing’ [...] And then we say, ‘let’s watch’ and from then they understand that they are in the context of this part, as a Black man or whatever, whatever, whatever. Then if that’s what they’re happy to take on them, yeah let’s watch, and see what happens.⁸⁵

It is a problem other Boal practitioners have faced; ‘Woe betide the joker who fudges their decision’, Ali Campbell cautions from one of his deft portraits of practice, ‘to decide whether to allow a man to replace a woman, an Able-Bodied replace a Disabled character, or a White a Black one. You might care, you might sympathise, you might empathise, you might even identify... But can you substitute?’⁸⁶ Boal used the concept of ‘the mask’ throughout TO to offer ways to quickly adopt roles and types, to try on other statuses and behaviours, and to deconstruct emotions and beliefs. In a political conscientization to ‘dismantle social masks and rituals ... to lay bare all the oppressive relationships which emerge’, to ‘study the character of the oppressed/oppressor relationship, that most common of patterns, from a distance’.⁸⁷ Perhaps through visible, readable ‘difference’ of *other-than* in Forum Theatre substitutions, it is also possible to create the political power of distancing, as Brecht’s conceptualisation of *Verfremdungseffekt* had claimed for Epic Theatre. Whilst Boal does not fulsomely agree with Schechner’s reading of latency in Forum, ‘when a black plays a white, or a white or black, a man a woman or a woman a man, not only does it liberate the performers but we see that we construct our realities’, Boal concurs that inherent in the act of

⁸⁵ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

⁸⁶ Ali Campbell, *The Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice Today: An Introduction to the Work and Principles of Augusto Boal* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), 72.

⁸⁷ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 201.

the spect-actor stepping into the shoes of the character is the sensate demonstration that ‘there are always alternatives’.⁸⁸ Through the example of Cealy’s practice, I argue that if we can temper the heat of substitution and re-placing as an operation of dominance and hegemony through robust framing, this uncanny mode of disruption has the potential to offer a cooler space to reflect on the socio-political and economic discrepancies that fuel oppression. If curated by a labile joker, it has the potential to utilise difference productively and to analogise risk in performance toward the shared risks of solidarity.

Cealy is adamant too much explanation would fence in the intervention, with too many parameters dispelling the sense of possibility, playfulness, and hopefulness of the invitation to participate. Like Campbell, he knows the finely poised decisions made as a joker can impact the reception of the work, the mood music of the audience, the participant’s sense of reward – ‘I’m gambling with what I say and what I don’t say’.⁸⁹ Instead, Cealy strategically refuses over-surveillance, aligning with the demilitarisation of the state called for by Black radical politics, ‘I don’t feel I can get that real playful collective excitement to get on stage if I’m policing them too much. It makes people fearful’.⁹⁰ Clearing himself from the densities of the debate, Cealy reports that on the continuum of rule-followers through to rule-breakers, ‘I’m sort of more towards the end of ‘let’s see what happens, let’s just play and see what happens’.⁹¹ So, when Paola gets up on stage at the Streatham Library performance in November 2019, and Nica stops the action at the Brixton showing, Cealy is welcoming and facilitative of these two young white women who want to offer a way to help Jo.

Interestingly, though on both of the occasions they displace a Black actor to join the scene,

⁸⁸ Michael Taussig, Richard Schechner, and Augusto Boal, ‘Boal in Brazil, France, the USA: An Interview with Augusto Boal,’ *TDR (The Drama Review)* (The MIT Press) 34, no. 3 (Autumn, 1990): 61.

⁸⁹ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

neither offers to replace the protagonist, Jo. Instead, they both join the ‘work’ scene, becoming one of the battery of workers, that, although racialised in the playing, and offering comment on Black workers ‘code-switching’ in office environments, are the least culturally specific through their automaton behaviours (‘I’ll play any of you’ Nica says).⁹² Paola leads a workers’ revolution in her intervention and Nica dances exuberantly and defiantly with Jo, leading a ‘movement’ of uprising involving all the actors (even those not supposed to be on stage) to the delight of the audience. As the joyful chaos of the new scene fades away, Cealy greets Nica with respect for ‘changing the *whole* rhythm of the workplace!’ but challenges her on the economic consequences of her solution.⁹³ ‘But we have to join together’ says Nica resolutely, defending workers’ rights, ‘protest is never easy, strikes are never easy, but we must unify’.⁹⁴ She leaves the stage to more applause as the debate carries on over the feasibilities and realities of unionised action. Boal would have considered this something of a win.⁹⁵

The Affected Participating Body

Cealy has trouble getting the room to silence before the start of the forum section at the Brixton Library performance, November 19th, 2020. The audience are effervescent, chatty, and perhaps a little nervous of what will come next. Here, I want to site my analysis within

⁹² Code-switching is broadly the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting. The idea of code-switching has become a useful way for many Black workers to describe adopted changes in behaviours to align to professional spaces that are seen as enforcing a white cultural hegemony. See: Christopher Boulton, ‘Black Identities Inside Advertising: Race Inequality, Code Switching, and Stereotype Threat,’ *Howard Journal of Communications* 27, no.2 (2016): 130-144.

⁹³ Tony Cealy, ‘Mental Health and Suicide Performance Project (the forum), 19 November, 2019,’ accessed January 01, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kacmt355XLs&t=215s>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ ‘I believe it is more important to achieve a good debate than a good solution [...] Even if one does reach a solution, it may be good for the person who has proposed it, or good within the confines of the debate, but not necessarily useful or applicable for all the participants in the forum’. See: Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 259.

this performance to illustrate interventions made during the forum section to highlight aspects of Cealy's practice, and the complexity and multi-directionality of embodied participation as a rights-claiming exercise. Cealy has delved into his toolkit of warm-up exercises and divided the audience into two 'opposing teams' inviting them into friendly competition – 'forging a 'group' out of a bunch of people, a sort of 'communion''⁹⁶– and now the room is noisy and overlapping. The energy in the room is spumy; in the aftermath of the play there is little time for release, not the formal closure of the dramatic work concluded and curtain-down, instead the play will be repeated (parts of the action over and over) and the audience will be called upon and up onto the stage. Cealy is well into his explanatory patter as to the operation of the forum, 'this is the part of the evening that we've all been looking forward to', he enthuses, reweighting the locus of the event away from pre-planned performance of text towards the as-yet unknown and unscripted, 'so, when we invite you to *come up onto* the stage' this statement elicits audible draws of breath, nervous laughter, and eruptions of 'nah, no way' from the young men sitting on the front row.⁹⁷ But in this human rights theatre there are those 'witnesses', as Cealy designates the audience, who are motivated by his call to 'conscience' to provide solutions to help Jo, who are prepared to take that risk to step onto the stage; in fact, there is a queue. TO, according to Adrian Jackson 'thrives on dissatisfaction', nudging the audience to action with prods of 'do not be satisfied with less than you need'.⁹⁸ And these women, quick to join the queue, are ready to address their dissatisfaction. The first woman asks to play 'the teacher' in the scene where Jo is faced with an intimidating battalion of education and social work professionals to discuss his 'disruptive behaviour'. She brings her own deft articulacy and attempts a de-escalation via apologies and a plea for the recognition of difficult circumstances for teachers in state education– but

⁹⁶ Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 264.

⁹⁷ Tony Cealy, 'Mental Health and Suicide Performance Project (the warm up), 19 November, 2019,' accessed January 01, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18fzlKogijM>

⁹⁸ Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, xxiv.

Shombe playing Jo is having none of it. He defiantly rejects her excuses and fires volleys of counterattacks. Occupying the ‘dialectical’ space of the Forum actor is a complex practice, part character-actor, part improviser, part activist, part trainer, ideological rhetorician, and pedagogue – whilst often being a member of the highlighted oppressed group. Whereas Forum relies on the magic of a hyper-elasticity of time, place and people, Boal rejects the idea of ‘magic’ solutions (Stop – that’s magic!), urging the actor not to be ‘soft’ with spect-actors as this will mislead beliefs that rights-problems posed by the play are easy to solve: ‘They must show the difficulties which will appear, while retaining a manner which encourages the spect-actor to break the oppression’ Boal counselled, urging Forum actors that ‘while still countering every phrase and action, they should awaken in the spect-actor other stances, other approaches’.⁹⁹ ‘Are we making progress?’ asks Cealy, and this spect-actor retreats, her body made as small as possible as she leaves the stage.

[Later a young man, Tait, asks to play the Uncle; he carries his shyness all the way through his body and out into his busy twisting fingers as he tries out his intervention, and he physically crumples into a self-castigating silence as Jo/Shombe spars with his Uncle/Tait. The other actors immediately sense Tait’s vulnerability and stride in to support Tait/Uncle: ‘Do you know how lucky you are to have an uncle like this!’ exclaims one of the actors in the scene. Shombe/Jo backs down and as Tait leaves the stage, Cealy tells him, ‘You made an impact on Jo, you made an impact on everybody here tonight’ and Shombe concurs, ‘it was from your heart, so you made me listen’.¹⁰⁰ Tait straightens in his body, a *sentient* response to his participation. Watching this exchange, it is easy to hope that this affirmation will have encouraged Tait to act again.]

The next spect-actor to take the stage, Yewande, also admits intervening is ‘really hard work’.¹⁰¹ Yewande has performed a remarkable intervention; her conscientized Jo deconstructs the physical power dynamics of the appraisal, ‘as this meeting is about me, I

⁹⁹ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 265.

¹⁰⁰ Tony Cealy, ‘Mental Health and Suicide Performance Project (the forum), 19 November, 2019,’ accessed January 01, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kacmt355XLs&t=215s>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

should have the first word. You are always holding meetings about me, without talking to me' Jo/Yewande asserts. If 'conscientization is an ongoing process of loosening ontological bondage' for a participant to move toward critical consciousness,¹⁰² here we see audience members asserting their human rights towards democratic participation in governing systems in a witnessed collective act. Reviewing the intervention with Cealy, Yewande accepts that Jo will be labelled as a troublemaker for asserting his rights, 'but then as a Black boy he's been labelled already'. Jamila then steps up to play Jo's mother, replacing the weary and shamed character in the original model, successfully reorienting the meeting with calm interrogation, spinning the language of personal development and betterment back toward the panel to highlight their derelictions. Julie also draws appreciation from the audience when she steps into the role of Jo's father in a later scene, subverting the back-and-forth argument with an offer to spend some dedicated time together. Whilst some of these interventions were audacious, articulate and poignant, had these been 'magic' solutions?¹⁰³ I want to draw an analogy here between the 'magic' in TO, the productive fictions of aesthetic architecture and the utopia of the human rights project; between the otherworldly, incantatory composition of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which marks the 'advent' of a harmonised, ethical Anthropocene epoch, and the criticisms of impossibility in the application and enforcement of global human rights instruments. Whilst motivated by dissatisfaction, both are utopian projects – systematised, grounded in protocols, options for practical concrete action, but requiring collective imagination, functioning through desire. 'Art is love' offers

¹⁰² Paolo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2005), 14.

¹⁰³ There are several performances where Cealy really challenges the audience, 'I know what you want to happen, but life isn't always that easy!' (Cealy, 'mental health and suicide performance 15.02.2020') and asks if proposed solutions are realistic or if there are hidden consequences – as he expresses, he is in a live and dynamic situation where he must be responsive to his reading of the needs of the audience community at that time.

Boal, '(l)ove offers no guarantee of stability. Just as we must cultivate art with love, the cultivation of love is an art'.¹⁰⁴

Whilst Boal recognises that the action within the model must shift and take new paths in order to demonstrate where change is possible, he also warns a spect-actor can sometimes replace an actor and modify the character in such a way that 'the solution becomes completely magic. The spect-actor must respect the 'givens' of the problem'.¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere in Forum Theatre practice, as per the methodology espoused by Cardboard Citizens, customarily only the protagonist/the oppressed character can be substituted.¹⁰⁶ When I ask Cealy in our interview about the potential for wish-fulfilment solutions in his Forum Theatre, he impishly positioned himself as a 'rule-breaker' in distinct contrast to the stricter adherence to Boal's system by the 'headmasters' of TO methodology.¹⁰⁷ Cealy links this non-adherence to the requirement to work expediently to achieve the ideo-political and socio-therapeutic needs of his audiences:

In the theatre, I'm making with communities, they have no idea about these rules other than the perception, the need, the desire, the importance of what they are there for, and what they want to say. I can't curtail them and say 'hang on a minute, no you can't do this; you can't do that' in a heated moment when things are flaring up. If they want to go and play somebody that is resonating with them and they're identifying with, because you know they've had trauma with their dad, or they want to play a particular character and they're not meant to according to the rules - what am I going

¹⁰⁴ Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, 19.

¹⁰⁵ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 267.

¹⁰⁶ Boal sets out the rules for spect-actor substitution in Forum as follows: 'In Theatre of the Oppressed, reality is shown not only as it is, but also, more importantly, as it could be. Which is what we live for – to become what we have the potential to be. This vital element is entrusted to the creativity of the audience: the spectators come on stage, substituting themselves for the protagonist, and trying to find viable solutions for real problems' See: Boal, *Games for Actors*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Cealy impishly joked about Adrian Jackson's insistence on certain Forum protocols, 'you know he'd call me to the side and say, 'Tony, yes, well, I told you before that, with the way that we do it here, we only change the protagonist. And I know that you're excited, and I know you've worked with many practitioners, and they have a different way of approaching it, but we at Cardboard Citizens, we stick with this format, so please. This is the second time I've told you, and you're a lovely chap' – and this is still Adrian talking – 'please just stay with the protagonist' and it's almost like getting told off by the headmaster! See: Cealy, Interview, 2021.

say to them, in that moment? That they can't do it? No way, no way. So, instead, I'm like, 'yeah let's do it'.¹⁰⁸

Adrian Jackson identifies Forum Theatre as the 'exception' to the statement that TO publications should not be treated as 'rule-books' or 'catechism', however, just as Boal amended and developed his practice, Jackson affirms the 'techniques should be adapted to suit the participants, not vice versa'.¹⁰⁹ In later reflections, and in a mirror to the problems of competing human rights, Boal acknowledged 'we started to find situations where oppression was not so clear cut, yet both parties claimed to be oppressed' and he applauded the 'creative heresy' of necessary deviations.¹¹⁰ It is a sentiment that Julian Boal agrees with, 'I think we have a problem in TotO that we think there are techniques that are written in stone forever' acknowledging he proceeds with the mantra 'to use [Boal] without criticising him is to betray him'.¹¹¹ Barbara Santos who has worked to de-centre white ownership and orthodoxies around Boal also rejects the idea of 'fixing' Boal as a transmissible system that generates 'experts', specifically, she aligns with Cealy's position, drawing on ideas of Black feminist thought in rejecting 'the White tradition of Verticalism' in the system.¹¹² In Jamila and Janet's interventions above, they are not side-stepping the locus of oppression in choosing to re-play other characters, rather they are responding to the multiple sites of oppression within Jo's family, within Jo's community, both women using this human rights theatre to speak directly to the audience about parenting and finding good role models for 'our young black men'.¹¹³ Cealy is interested in giving his audience permission, in helping Jo/Kwame 'there might be other roles you want to play' and in 'playing the game, we raise our game

¹⁰⁸ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire*, xxii.

¹¹⁰ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 9.

¹¹¹ Campbell, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, 219.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 208.

¹¹³ Cealy, 'mental health and suicide performance project (the forum)'.

together'.¹¹⁴ Moving towards my concluding exploration of Cealy's digital Forum innovations, I now turn towards an examination of the ideo-ethical dynamics within the work of BMC to also elaborate on the ideas of 'liveness', presence, and collectivity.

Rights In Ethical Making

The *Jo/Kwame* play continues to tour to community spaces throughout the winter of 2019 and re-emerges in February of 2020, with the lead character called Kwame. There are continuities and discontinuities from the previous production, new perspectives and events found in the weekly making sessions.¹¹⁵ Though the group of performers has transitory elements - there are role swaps between shows, new members, much younger participants - the identity of the group stabilises into the Black Men's Consortium through the spring of 2020, as a company of performers, as a collective, and as compelling advocates for the issues they face around mental health. Question-&-Answer sessions are now appended to performances. There has been transformation within the members of the group and in the fabric of the company, towards consciousness and Black Consciousness. 'They've all been on their own journeys' Cealy emphasises, letting the Streatham Library audience know that Chin's suicidal ideation has reduced significantly since being with the group. A central member of the Consortium, thoughtful and funny, Chin's deep trauma bubbles up in rehearsals, orchestrating the group to play out a scene where his mum's ashes have been lost. The other actors are role-playing defensive brother and conciliatory dad, but Chin's howl of 'where's my mum?' at the end of scene comes from somewhere deeper and is an unsettling

¹¹⁴ Cealy, 'mental health and suicide performance 15.02.2020'.

¹¹⁵At this point in time, most have heard of a flu-like virus, a coronavirus emerging in 2019 that seems to be having disproportionate impacts on people's health, and everybody is washing their hands more. At this point you cannot buy hand-sanitiser in the shops, but for now performances continue. Kwame will soon be an online performance, a Zoom-Forum innovation, but for now the actors make jokes, 'you can't touch me, you might have that Corona' See: Cealy, 'Social-Distancing Summer Performance Project - Week 6 of rehearsals, 24 August. 2020'.

reminder of the stakes at and within *play*.¹¹⁶ The group rehearsals are a mixture of games, exercises, developing scenes and discussions which Cealy assiduously documents. I comment on the rehearsal/making practices here because they reveal issues about rights claiming, competing rights and rights denial that are not visible in the performance practice.

When I asked Cealy about the impacts of working on mental health and the potential for recycling trauma through the group, he responded that, for him, this was a continuous practice: ‘as facilitators, we have that duty of care, and we notice upset or difficulty and we want to try to provide space and a little bit of healing or timeout or whatever it may be’.¹¹⁷ Significantly, however, Cealy also critically highlights a history of cavalier ethical practice in TO problematising automatic identification of ethical practice in human rights fora, ‘I don’t think Boal ever did ethics for me, personally. He didn’t really care whether someone was traumatised by an exercise, or an intervention’.¹¹⁸ Cealy maintains he is improving on a legacy, where Boal ‘never did that kind of care; people would break down in sessions and become emotional and there was never an imperative to stop it’.¹¹⁹ Cealy’s comment is reflective of the focus on the development of ethical and co-dimensional relational practices in the second-generation of practitioners.¹²⁰ Artists such as Julie Salverson see Boal’s call to have ‘the courage to be happy’ demonstrated in the ‘ethics of a courageous, tough kind of relationship that is not based on avoidance, but in contact with others and oneself’, where the

¹¹⁶ Tony Cealy, ‘Social-Distancing Summer Performance Project - Week 6 of rehearsals, 24 August. 2020,’ accessed January 01, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_t7fzWZIg4. The footage of this rehearsal is appended with the statement ‘We all came from our mothers. Losing a mother is difficult in the easiest of times. In some families there is always difficulties that puts a strain on the relationships you have with others. This was one member’s experience of loss and grief.’

¹¹⁷ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman, *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 8.

facilitator/witness should reject paralysis in favour of meeting the challenge of suffering.¹²¹ We can see this attitude clearly in Cealy's work where he promotes the strategy of active 'reconciliation' through a progressive process of 'removing blockages' as well as providing rehearsal opportunities to encounter and experience failure.¹²² This reconciliation practice might manifest in the playing of a game where there will be winners and losers, or in the replaying of a life event where there are broken relationships, battles for custody, bad debts, and loss of status. After, there will be conversation, and perhaps even acceptance from the group. A little repair. A little change. Navigating the rupture within and without the drama, Cealy sees himself as someone holding 'a space where men can come and feel comfortable and be themselves and be in a group [...] and just be emotionally held by other men as well'.¹²³

Alongside the recognisable TO games urging free movement and expression such as 'Columbian Hypnosis', 'Follow the Leader', 'Carnival in Rio' and 'West Side Story', Cealy also adapts games to amplify the social or political moment the group are exploring.¹²⁴ 'The Machine of Rhythms' game is overlaid by players adding lines about their mental health, laying bare the amplification of the oppression through discrimination: 'Can you hear me? / Are you taking your medication? / That's not what I said / No one cares, it's always me / It's always us / They don't like us / That's racism'.¹²⁵ In another adaptation of this game entitled 'The Rights Machine', the depictions are all a lack of rights, a lack of dignity, where asking

¹²¹ Julie Salverson, 'Witnessing subjects: a fool's help,' in *A Boal Companion: Dialogues on theatre and social politics*, edited by Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 146-158.

¹²² Tony Cealy, 'Social-Distancing Summer Performance Project: Week 9 of rehearsals 15 September, 2020,' accessed January 01, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiDU4qj-gCs&t=64s>.

¹²³ Tony Cealy, 'The Black Men's Consortium performance at the Listen 'Mental Health' Festival', 16 June, 2020, accessed July 01, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn00DmVqtHk>.

¹²⁴ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 2002.

¹²⁵ In this section I have collected notes from rehearsal practice across 2019 – 2021 shared online by Tony Cealy via his YouTube channel.

for help is met with scorn.¹²⁶ A familiar TO game where a returnee must find who is leading and changing the group movement is expediently politicised by Cealy, who here performs a Caribbean patois to call upon a rich political vein of Black activism and draw the group into a known place of Black solidarity, urging the players that the ‘Black community is in peril, and needs healing, and we need to find good *leaders*. Some of us are not unifying. Some of us have a got a lot of egos in the Black community. That’s why we can’t work together. Gwan my king’.¹²⁷ In the same set of rehearsals, Cealy asks the group to engage in an Image Theatre exercise – so far, so Boal. But in Cealy’s hands the words to respond to are ‘heritage, Africa, Black’, illiciting strong physicalised images of respect, hope, aspiration, pride - however, when ‘racism’ is offered, postures change to defensive, wounded, supine. For the prompt ‘white’, bodies turn into hectoring caricatures with wagging fingers, for ‘police’ the images are violent, grabbing, hitting, and kicking. For ‘England’, the positions adopted are aloof, dismissive, and in a more satirical vein, a presentation of the ‘arse’ to signal perceptions of national disdain.¹²⁸ Beyond portrayals of violence by the police, doctors are disregarding, and mental health workers are disparaging, all the time fearful of heightened aggression from Black bodies and an imagined additional potency of Black madness.¹²⁹ The courts are depicted as condescending and as a nightmarish rigged system with byzantine rules

¹²⁶ Tony Cealy, ‘Social-Distancing Summer Performance Project Week 3 Rehearsals,’ accessed 3 August 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVBDHzG-mwE>

¹²⁷ Cealy titles this rehearsal as being about the difficulties of being an ‘ethical leader’, where ‘it comes with lots of opportunities, challenges and even crises. Here the members state what kind of leader they want to be or who inspires them. OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS HEALING AND LEADERSHIP’. See: Cealy, ‘Social-Distancing Summer Performance Project (Week 2 rehearsal),’ accessed 27 July 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKSG6jxxFbM>

¹²⁸ Tony Cealy, ‘Social-Distancing Summer Performance Project (Week 5 rehearsals),’ accessed August 5 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMaemK86nvA>

¹²⁹ As several of the group are ‘mental health professionals’ working in drug and alcohol recovery, supporting families through the social care system, occupational therapy and providing therapeutic support in prisons, it is interesting to see the antipathy towards the limitations of the state-run services. One of the members of the group, Lloyd, reported that ‘Working as a mental health practitioner, I wanted to do more for my community around the misconceptions surrounding mental health and wellbeing. I see a lot of my brothers in hospital. When you listen to their stories and journeys, you feel, why wasn’t their intervention given earlier? This person didn’t have to be here if he were given the support and the tools to equip themselves’. See: Gargie Ahmed, ‘You can’t go through hell alone’, 20 April, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://brixtonblog.com/2021/04/you-cant-go-through-hell-alone/>.

and abstruse protocols to keep men stereotyped as ‘absent fathers’ from their children.¹³⁰ In this human rights theatre, the arms and organs of the state repeat as antagonistic and discriminatory in the men’s experience.

Whereas interventions from women in the Forum Theatre performances, or in the public discussion spaces are welcomed and endorsed by the group, there is a strong vein of misogyny running through initial improvisations with the potential to reproduce patterns of oppression. In amongst the congratulatory rhetoric of protecting men’s mental health and incorporating them away from isolation, women are represented as troublesome beings, dependent, argumentative, inconstant, and duplicitous – ‘That bitch has gone off with my children / These girls will get you down / I can’t let a woman disrespect me / she’ll come to my discipline / that bitch is nagging me / You call yourself a mother? You disgust me’.¹³¹ The violence that percolates up through some of this language is shocking and matched by a self-directed brutality which emanates from the participants themselves, ‘I can’t sleep. I toss. I turn / Counting sticks in the dark / Visions of bodies being burned / Every time my eyes close/ I start sweating / Blood comes out of my nose / Someone’s trying to kill me / Bang. And get it over with’.¹³² Cealy recognises his work is set amongst finely poised domestic dynamics and inflamed interpersonal behaviours, ‘some of the men I’ve worked with over the lockdown have said they have stopped themselves talking about and thinking about suicide’ however, he also dejectedly gestures to where focus upon tackling some oppressions might mask scrutiny upon others, recalling that the ‘men have said, “I’ve been getting really stressed at home and taking it out my missus because I’m banged up, you know, at home”’.

¹³⁰ Cealy, ‘Social-Distancing Summer Performance Project (Week 5 rehearsals),’ August 5 2020

¹³¹ Tony Cealy, ‘Mental Health and Suicide Performance Project (Rehearsals 09.03.2020),’ accessed 17 May, 2020

¹³² Tony Cealy, ‘Mental Health and Suicide Performance Project (Rehearsal 27.01.20),’ accessed 20 January, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYDfrSUcxDM>

So, domestic violence is much more on the rise'.¹³³ The performance works do not confront the ugly, criminal behaviour of domestic abuse, do not expose, nor excavate it, but Cealy sees the weekly workshops as providing a place of 'trust and honesty', that in sharing these darkest truths, within the protective architecture of the facilitated group and the aesthetic framings, prevention can be found.

Cealy is often bluntly honest with the men in the room, pushing them when they are not joining in with games, pursuing better contributions, chiding them for missing the beat, or being too slow on an entrance; 'c'mon, this is not a holiday camp' he says exasperatedly during one rehearsal.¹³⁴ As with the facilitators of ACT NOW, there is a toughness about Cealy's address to his community work, and to return to Salverson's words, an ethical toughness that 'is not based in avoidance, but in contact with others and oneself'.¹³⁵ But for Cealy there is also 'sheer delight to see these men "play" and enjoy themselves'.¹³⁶ Beyond the Consortium's stated intentions to develop strategies for citizen action and to build solidarity through rights-claiming, there is also the radical political action of men's play and playfulness as reclamation of full humanity against the instituted stereotypes placed upon Black men where their bodies are often read through violence, illegitimacy, alterity; 'we come into play' Cealy reiterates, 'when we can play as children that's when all the other things will come, the deeper stories, the connections, the bonds that we have'.¹³⁷ One workshop orchestrates a room of 16 older men to play 'The bear of Poitiers', where a team of 'bears' have to provoke motionless 'lumberjacks' into movement which will reveal them as

¹³³ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

¹³⁴ Tony Cealy, 'mental health and suicide performance project (the warm up),' accessed 19 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18fzlKogijM>

¹³⁵ Salverson, 'Witnessing subjects,' 146.

¹³⁶ Cealy, 'Mental Health and Suicide Performance Project (Rehearsals 09.03.2020)'.

¹³⁷ Cealy, Interview, 2021

edible.¹³⁸ Behind the scenes there is serious talk of tactics and team strategies, laughter at the ludicrous lengths suggested, respect paid to underhand manoeuvres. Effective play has the potential to remove those emotions of shame and guilt Ahmed identifies as ‘sticky’ it can ease the ‘stuckness’ Cealy identifies as pernicious.¹³⁹ Play has a palpable *sentient* impact on the lived body through the act of participation, ‘it’s been a total release’ says Robbie Williams, one of the performers, ‘that’s the good thing about being in this group. It just uplifts you’.¹⁴⁰

Transmedia And Transpersonal Forum

For Cealy, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent string of national lockdowns was more than the pervasive cloud of apprehension and uncertainty over an illness with unknown contours, more than the inconvenience of restricted access and movement, or even the economic and employment uncertainty, even more than the emerging mental health crises forged in the combination of these pernicious factors. His concern was also how to ‘ensure that Black Men are not the first to die in this ongoing pandemic?’.¹⁴¹ By June 2020, the Office for National Statistics confirmed Black men were more than three times more likely to die of Coronavirus than their white equivalents.¹⁴² Deaths from Covid in the UK were not just tragic, they were political. Public Health England found historical racism was contributing to dissuading BAME individuals from seeking timely care, but also reports were emerging of poor triage of Black and ethnic minority patients, based on mis-diagnosis of

¹³⁸ Boal, *Games for Actors*, 78.

¹³⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 10.

¹⁴⁰ Tony Cealy, ‘The Black Men’s Consortium performance at the Listen ‘Mental Health’ Festival, 2021,’ accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn00DmVqtHk>

¹⁴¹ Tony Cealy, ‘The Black Men’s Consortium ‘Kwame & The Lockdown (performance 1),’ 25 May, 2020, accessed January 01, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wrm2rKtKfU&t=3431s>.

¹⁴² Chris White and Vahé Nafilyan, ‘Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales: 2 March 2020 to 15 May 2020,’ (London: The Office for National Statistics, 2020).

symptoms never modelled upon Black bodies.¹⁴³ When combined with higher rates of poverty, more public-facing jobs, chronic physical and mental ill-health and social overcrowding, the pandemic became a human rights issue for the Black community in the UK.¹⁴⁴ The four cycles of online performances Cealy produced with BMC of *Kwame & the Lockdown*, pick up and replay these rights infringements. There is named suspicion of disparities and motives, and profound distrust of the state: ‘I am scared of this government, we are getting killed out there, I’m scared’ is the despairing cry from the online *Kwame* performance of November 2020.¹⁴⁵ Across iterations of the production, Cealy sets the animating question; ‘how can Black Men survive COVID 19 and remain proactive during these challenging and uncertain times?’¹⁴⁶

Kwame is shown in different scenes to be vulnerable to rapidly changing employment conditions for precarious workers, to the policing of restrictions, family death and illness, the loss of support networks and proper contact with mental health services, isolation feeding destructive internal narratives. However, in emphasising Kwame’s racialised vulnerabilities through the new Forum plays, BMC offered a place of opposition and protest to the human rights issues intensified through the pandemic. The weekly online workshops and rehearsals become a place of defiance against separation and segregation, where participants report the sensate experiences of ‘feeling lighter in the chest’.¹⁴⁷ At the close of sessions, the group can be seen offering affirmations towards one another and to the existence of the group,

¹⁴³ Public Health England, ‘Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups,’ (Open Government report, London: PHE publications).

¹⁴⁴ Household economics and education for Black communities were also disproportionately affected by the pandemic, highlighting the nexus of ESCR that were impinged (see The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) 2020).

¹⁴⁵ Tony Cealy, The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & The Lockdown (performance 3)’, 29 November, 2020, accessed January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79C4bzd4keI&t=1033s>.

¹⁴⁶ Tony Cealy, The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & The Lockdown (performance 1)’, 25 May, 2020, accessed January 01, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wrm2rKtKfU&t=3431s>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

acknowledging the respite of this new virtual space. Initially, Cealy switched to online workshops purely to circumvent lockdown restrictions, however, he revealed in interview he had become fascinated by the geographic, demographic, methodologic, and aesthetic potential of this online human rights theatre form. Identifying benefit in running a hybrid model to collect people together – ‘[s]o, for me, it's still about making *live* work, but still making digital work, because it's opened up a whole new world’¹⁴⁸– with the different modes attracting and retaining different sets of participants. This perhaps ushers in a digital human rights theatre that leans into the transhumanist understandings of *sentience*. The potential for participation is not in the multi-layered feelingness of contact and personal proximity, but rather a dis-located embodiment and a virtual occupation of space, a cybernated collectivity.

Cealy and BMC produced several versions of *Kwame & the Lockdown*- from May 2020 through to October 2021 – noting the lineage between each iteration, pieces were called ‘remixes’¹⁴⁹– though high levels of improvisation meant an inbuilt instability to the ‘text’. Each performance was conducted online, incorporating a cast of between 6 to 12 people dialling in from separate locations and lasting approximately 30-45mins, followed immediately by a matrixed participatory section asking the audience to remain in the fictive world of the characters to advise or ‘solve’ their problems. ‘It doesn’t beat being physically on the stage, but it’s better than nothing’ reported one of the longstanding members of the group, Lloyd, ‘it really was helpful for the lockdown. We touched audiences that we never would have touched had they been in the physical space’.¹⁵⁰ The performances were wrapped by ritual that revealed renewed political commitment. Cealy curating the transition

¹⁴⁸ Cealy, Interview, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ The performances in late June 2020 were entitled *Kwame & the Lockdown BLM & Windrush Remix*, 28/06/20, rapidly incorporating the recent political events, and changing the story so that the ‘Father’ character moves from being a grieving presence split between warring sons, to being re-cast as the recipient of letters telling him that he will be deported back to the Caribbean and away from his family.

¹⁵⁰ Gargie Ahmed, ‘You can’t go through hell alone,’ 2021.

from the technologically awkward ('your camera is still on', 'your microphone is still off') online 'gathering phase' via a spiritual offering of libations to honour the ancestors.

Furthermore, in a concomitant shift to his activist intentions, he utilised the 'dispersal' phase to require the audience to openly pledge active commitments to change, connecting the transcendent and the ethico-political realms of his work.

The *Kwame* plays are Forum for the digital theatre era; Cealy accelerating his previous adaptations of the form to respond to the practical limitations.¹⁵¹ Cealy reports the online performances came together 'quickly'. The rapidity of the production belying the formal innovation in the dramaturgy and construction of the *mise-en-scène* in the online performances. There is play in the temporal and locational pliability of the form; digital scenography and soundtracks portray the inner and outer world of the characters, intersplicing media coverage with parodies of politicians and caricatures of the commentariat. This distinguishes *Kwame & the Lockdown* in Cealy's Forum Theatre panoply as a strain of rapid-response political satire, with news and events rapidly transposed into the script. Shifting health messaging, emerging disease variants, political scandals and Black Lives Matter protests ('I'm starting a business making t-shirts saying BAME OVER' says Kwame as an entrepreneurial response¹⁵²), all percolating up through different iterations of the script. As the group become accustomed to this new form, initial political salvos are played clunkily through the 'did you know that' of unforced exposition but over the course of the online project, layering of external context becomes more distributed across the performance. In the May 2021 production, the action moves from a scene showing Kwame's arrest to his

¹⁵¹ Using the Zoom tools of the 'chat' application to field comments or questions, and to create 'word avalanches', opinion polls, and breakout rooms, Cealy was attempting to use the vocabulary of this new performance platform to make the work interactive and participatory.

¹⁵² Tony Cealy, Black Men's Consortium, 'Kwame & the end of Lockdown (Performance 4) 14 May, 2020,' accessed June 01, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5k-6T-H1EY&t=26s>.

relocation in a prison cell. The time/place shift is not the rearrangement of bodies on stage, but instead a montage of newspaper headlines underscored by police sirens: ‘Young black men stopped and searched 20,000 times during London lockdown’ / ‘Met Police ‘stop and search equivalent of 1 in 4 young black men in London during lockdown’ / ‘Met police twice as likely to fine black people over lockdown breaches’ / ‘Eyewatering: top police officer laments rate of the stop and search on young black men’.¹⁵³ These are never referenced by the characters but left for the audience to interpret the human rights implications of Kwame’s detention. Cealy also creates locational movement in the plays, flipping from phone cameras to laptop cameras means we enter the house with Kwame in ‘real-time’, or follow Kwame’s troubled friend, Mark, as he video-calls whilst walking the streets of London – trains rattling past, sounds leaking from houses, dipping in and out of the streetlights. The story also travels between the separated members of the group. The cast are no longer taken from a corner of South London, a group with a physical community identity, now with participants from other parts of the UK, from the Midlands, Yorkshire, and even further afield from the US and Singapore.¹⁵⁴ The transnational cast benefits to the process, ‘I felt I’d come home’ says David joining from Leeds, and for Matthew Murray in the States, ‘I’ve formed a brotherhood across the water’.¹⁵⁵ However, it was also clear members of the cast for *Kwame & the End of Lockdown* had joined for acting opportunities, here participation was representational, on behalf of the rights of others.¹⁵⁶ The more tenuous identity of the group impacted consistency of participation, Cealy noting, ‘we had 20 men that started in January,

¹⁵³ Tony Cealy, Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & the end of Lockdown (Performance 4) 14 May, 2020,’

¹⁵⁴ The fourth version of the play, using the actor Kaleem based in Southeast Asia as a tech-advisor dialing into a conference call to Kwame’s place of work. See: Tony Cealy, The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & the end of Lockdown (Performance 4)’. 14 May 2021. Accessed June 01, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5k-6T-H1EY&t=26s>.

¹⁵⁵ The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Projects’, April 2021, <http://theblackmensconsortium.com/projects/>

¹⁵⁶ The shutdown of the creative industries in the pandemic nudged creatives towards other projects. These new participants were talking about the work in more theatrical and professional terms; the community outreach work of involving Black men with mental health issues was of a second order. This did not diminish the impact of the pieces, in fact the performance *skills* were notably more honed, but less about personal participation to ‘rehearse’ oneself as a safeguard against ill-treatment and rights denial.

and we've only got 8 with us here tonight. We've lost a few men along the way; they've faced many a challenge and they are not here today'.¹⁵⁷

Virtual Utopias

As highlighted above, Cealy created 'Zoom backdrops' of interior and exterior locations to situate characters in the *Kwame* plays – the digital platform retained the main image of the performer, pasting them on top of the static photograph. Not only does this allow Cealy to site the character, but where the backdrop is reproduced across multiple participant screens, for the viewer to also read the characters as temporally and physically co-located, or part of the same paradigm-place. In the June 2020 BLM 'remix' of *Kwame*, a restaging of a Black Lives Matter protest with Kwame and other characters against an identical image of protesters, uncannily united the characters in terms of geography, but not of shared *placedness*, the impossibility of occupying exactly the same place breaking the contract of televisual modes of viewing. The restrictive 'turn-taking' mechanics of Zoom (prioritising one loudest voice) prevents the unifying voice, and solidarity is necessarily performed sequentially not simultaneously. The peculiar body boundaries of the digital image – sometimes partial, sometimes waxing and waning, stuttering, existing spectrally between human and object – premised on artificial intelligence capture of person boundaries, is visually disruptive with a supranormal transhuman quality.¹⁵⁸ In this curation, *sentience* is splintered. The aesthetic realisation of Kwame's ruptured mental health at the close of the play is accelerated by the digital fracture of the performer, accompanied by intense close-up shots of skittering eyeballs, twitching face muscles, and grimacing teeth. I assert this offers

¹⁵⁷ Tony Cealy, The Black Men's Consortium, 'Kwame & the end of Lockdown,' (Performance 4), 2021.

¹⁵⁸ This has been shown to be more pronounced for Black and dark-skinned people because the initial algorithm building for virtual backgrounds was built around recognition of white faces and skin-tones.

the audience a proximity with the character's psychic state, previously played with broad brushstrokes.¹⁵⁹ However, this is *worlds apart* from the stacked-up liveness/lived-ness of earlier *Kwame/Jo* performances where we see, hear, and feel the weight of the cast on stage, the exhalation of laughter, the heat of the audience together, chanting in unison, rubbing shoulders, a place where shared *sentience* coalesces into a collective consciousness.

The form allows Cealy and BMC to take more eclectic dramaturgical and theatrical approaches, stretching the style and assemblage of the Forum model to include spoken-word poetry, faux television discussion panel shows.¹⁶⁰ I also note the use of two prescient commentators – Dreadlock and Baldhead – outside of all time and place, intended to be within an *Ou-topos* of no-placedness, who control the onstage traffic and permit us (in)sight into the dilemmas Kwame is facing. Some of this constellation of styles and techniques is due to the apportioning of the rehearsal process, dividing up the story to smaller groups to build scenes, with fewer all-cast scenes characterising the earlier in-person plays. This divisible making process exposed serious fissures in the group, with one participant, Steve, breaking the self-congratulatory post-performance discussion, declaring that he was 'disgruntled' his ideas had dismissed and publicly announcing, 'I will probably leave after this performance'.¹⁶¹ The actor playing Kwame in the first two productions, Michael Hippolyte Jnr., revealed he had not met any Consortium members in person, and though he welcomed the opportunity to be in the process, that there had been significant friction in developing the piece ('we've had some rough moments and people leaving the group').¹⁶² Here I emphasise

¹⁵⁹ Played bravely by actor Sani Thabo, a drama student at the time of the production, who was notably able to utilise the filmic framing of Zoom to manufacture different effect and affect.

¹⁶⁰ One such example is the 'Black Attack' gameshow where, in a commentary upon the human rights issue of political imprisonment, the successful contestant earns an all-expenses paid stay in prison. See: The Black Men's Consortium. 'Kwame & the Lockdown (performance 3)', 29 November 2020.

¹⁶¹ Tony Cealy, The Black Men's Consortium, 'Kwame & the Lockdown BLM & Windrush Remix (performance 3)', accessed 28 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nB8Q1DkiEbY>

¹⁶² Ibid.

the disinhibition of behaviours in online environments and the virality and transmissibility of negative emotions in digital spaces as factors contributing to a lack of group harmony, as opposed to the mutual accountability and cohesion developed through the live/in-person versions of the Kwame/Jo story.¹⁶³ I argue the lack of shared *placedness* of this virtual human rights theatre diminishes the sensate collective responsibility and full consciousness of personal struggles or collective endeavours.¹⁶⁴

Disharmony also spread to the discussion sessions in the online performances – a conversation about the purposes of the Black Lives Matter movement becomes bad-tempered and strained, engendering questions of clarity and legibility of purpose not just of BLM, but of the *Kwame* plays.¹⁶⁵ Frustrations boil over between the members of the Consortium and Cealy. Keith Preddie, the voluble entertainer of the group, who has only come along this evening to ‘make theatre’, looks uncomfortable and offers tentatively that ‘all lives matter’.¹⁶⁶ This is not a collective human rights theatre; this is divided consciousness. This is a discussion enmeshed in the subject matter of rights-owning and rights-claiming, and yet without theatrical framing, with diminution of aesthetic parameters, tensions become directed not at the character’s situation, not at oppressive systemic structures, but instead, the arrows of debate become more personally pointed.¹⁶⁷ There were several online performances where

¹⁶³ Cathlin V Clark-Gordon, Nicholas D Brown, Alan K Goodboy, and Alyssa Wright, ‘Anonymity and Online Self-Disclosure: A Meta-Analysis,’ *Communication Reports*, 32, no.2 (2019): 98-111.

¹⁶⁴ I note the huge social and cultural pressures brought about by Covid and lockdowns will doubtless have exacerbated the usual stressors within the production process.

¹⁶⁵ The discussion gets stuck on whether BLM has learned the lessons of previous civil actions, whether the ‘lesbian’ founders of the movement in the UK are attempting to destroy the family, and by extension, Black men.

¹⁶⁶ The different ideologies behind Black Lives Matter and Preddie’s view that ‘Black and white must unite’ under a banner of ‘All Lives Matter’ was present in the protest scene in *Kwame BLM Remix*, but what I had read as scripted difference of opinion was actually expressive of the real-world views of the players. This occurs in many forms of semi-scripted theatre but there was also a ‘working out’ of a political moment between the group that leaked across the different sections of the performances. See: The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & the Lockdown BLM & Windrush Remix (performance 3)’.

¹⁶⁷ I identify this phenomenon across several performances, especially in the discussion session that might take place after the ‘forum’, if this has been conducted, but above I describe the debate that happened after the performance on 28th June 2020. This must be held in the context of the traumatising to many in the Black

Cealy abandoned the Forum Theatre practice of substitution, of ‘stepping into a character’s shoes’ in order to achieve an embodied felt-understanding of *sentience*. Instead, Cealy opted for conceptual questions focussed on ‘what should Kwame do?’. A directive inevitably prioritising coolly sanctioned behaviours and rational thinking– in these theoretically focussed forums there are no longer examples of ‘*sensible*’ visceral action. Rather, it is all *reason-able* ‘good advice’ about official services and reducing emotional velocity. It can also materialise as hectoring. In the online *Kwame* performances of November 2020, Cealy gave audience participants the option of ‘hot-seating’ characters, the actors improvising responses *as if* they were those characters. An audience member, Judy, articulate and patient, with clear experience of navigating social services, wanted to speak to Kwame’s ‘roadman’ friend, Mark, played by Wayne Chin.¹⁶⁸ She began to ask Mark what he thinks he needs to ‘make a change’, and the address to the subject – linear, implying, framing the terrain of the response – solicited an increasingly hostile response from Mark/Wayne:

to be honest lady, I’m finding this all quite patronising. It’s all “put you on a course, put you here, put you there” [...] ‘See, this is what I think, lady, about those that sit in their offices and talk to us about “what do you think?”. What do I think? `it doesn’t matter what I think, because out here, out here I have access to nothing.’¹⁶⁹

Cealy had to decisively interject to stop Chin from responding any further; Chin who has experienced significant periods of homelessness and abandonment by services has displaced Mark to directly convey his anger to Judy and her belief in systems and organisations and the protection of the state.¹⁷⁰ Without the gamification of Judy invited to play Mark, or Kwame,

community of the instigating factors for Black Lives Matter – and for the additional trauma of the lack of recognition of institutional and systemic racism by some white citizens of the UK. This was a fraught and emotional time for many, violent words and images recycled through the press as part of legitimated debate, and with some Black activists (such as Cealy) feeling that the BLM movement was not paying heed to the experience and wisdom of those who had spent decades campaigning.

¹⁶⁸ Tony Cealy, The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & The Lockdown (performance 3) 29 November, 2020,’ accessed January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79C4bzd4kcI&t=1033s>.

¹⁶⁹ Tony Cealy, The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & The Lockdown (performance 3)’.

¹⁷⁰ Tony Cealy, The Black Men’s Consortium, ‘Kwame & The Lockdown (performance 3)’.

and attempt the validity of her suggestions within the dynamic oppressive environment of the characters, she meets them as if a bystander, another advisor. Of course, in many respects, participants always remain bystanders in Forum Theatre, temporarily being and acting in a fictive space does not equal ‘sharing the same risks’ of solidarity, but it puts some sense of ‘skin in the game’. The innovation and world-building potential of the online form might offer transportation to a new location, but it is without that ‘skin’ on the stage. Transmedia theatre maker, Maya Chowdhry acknowledges there are sensitivities around whether some ‘emotive and highly-charged material’ is appropriate for digital participation.¹⁷¹ Chowdhry asserts online staging both amplifies and reflexively comments on the limitations of a flawed medium, but ultimately asks, ‘are there not some topics that work better when we are in the room together?’¹⁷² The replacement of collectivity for invective, of communality for unconcealed candour, is not a loss *if* the social values of playfulness and jest in the Forum encounter are no longer weighted. Judy attentively listened to Wayne/Mark but held her ground; she publicly validated this was something he needed to say. This creative reinvention of Forum Theatre allows for a more direct mode of discussion, but without the ludic rules, there is rawness and necessary emotion, there is clarity of focus, but I argue consciousness is atomised, it is not found in collective acts of solidarity.

¹⁷¹ Maya Chowdhry, ‘Making Digital Participatory Theatre: Chapter Three. Collective Encounters, 13 November 2020,’ accessed January 01, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thKvj2RSBUE&list=PLddyJP1WFANVwStfHX1pj2sxTAHp-437&index=3>.

For BMC, their online version of *Kwame* also critiqued ideas of social media, particularly the virality of vaccine misinformation circulating amongst the Black Community.

¹⁷² Chowdhry, ‘Making Digital Participatory Theatre,’ 2021.

Conclusion

In the concluding section of this chapter, I have travelled from a focus on the internal dynamics and making processes of a rights-claiming group as enumerated in the case-study of ACT NOW, to also place reflection upon the moments of audience participation in the productions of The Black Men's Consortium. In both case-studies there have been numerous illuminating moments of practice that have fallen out of scope of this study to bring to the reader sections of rich description of practice, attempting to align my critical methodology with my central interpretative framework of invoking a felt-understanding of what it was like to be in the room. In this part I have argued Cealy's hybridised and adaptive Forum Theatre places the audience in a three-dimensional, dynamised, corporeal and sensual moment of rights-denial to collectively pursue solutions. In pursuing Cealy's concentration on the politics of Black Men's liberation and concomitant impacts on mental health, I have argued for the representational restorative-justice effect of collective involvement in consciousness of racialised trauma. Stepping into this fictive-but-real moment of witnessed performance allows for a *sentient* reaction to human rights crises, especially when those are 'small and stubborn' problems, not beyond the event-horizon of schematic trauma, but those which can be grasped and transformed through collective community action. Forum Theatre is often limited in the complexity of the dramatic *mise-en-scène*, with restricted capacity to dramatically conjure up complex war-scapes, but its inherent volatility and mutability, and focus on achievable community action, means it may well be a tool for repair in the aftermath. In the conclusion to the thesis, I now turn to the closing analysis on the different articulations of human rights theatre through the case-studies discussed and pose points for further consideration.

Conclusion

Views of Emancipation

There is an aphorism about theatre as the ‘art of dying slowly in front of one another’ which speaks to vulnerability and revelation in the gift of presence. For an understanding of human rights theatre, I join this with Levinas’ reminder that to recognise the other is to say ‘[d]o not kill me’ where ethical commitments are charged in the performance space.¹ This thesis reflects the search for a human rights theatre; not as a set of play-texts performing human rights issues, but more as a viewing practice, the outcome of a praxis focussed on the interplay between the humanistic, the legal, the activist, and the theatrical. My investigation explores the ‘æffect’ of aesthetics understood as an integral part of human rights ethics,² and of how human rights are made manifest in aestheticised performances of thinking- and working-through. This thesis considers the productive intersection where ‘humanity steps in to help make greater sense of human rights’ with ‘its conceptual inconsistencies, political applications, and lasting claim on the imagination’,³ in light of Rancière’s proposal that this should be ‘the very job of art’.⁴ To declare human rights is to enact a transcendent claim, to assert beyond the present moment with recourse to a wider social imaginary; this aligns to a human rights theatre which invites audiences to transcend the present social moment to enact a rights imagination. This thesis argues human rights theatre utilises the sheltering capacity of aesthetic architectures to allow exploration of the dark violations that trouble our conscience.

¹ Jill Robbins, ‘Visage, Figure: Reading Levinas’s Totality and Infinity,’ in *Yale French Studies*, no. 79 (1991): 135–49.

² Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert, *Why Artistic Activism* (New York: The Center for Artistic Activism, 2018), 3.

³ Sophia A. McClennen and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, ‘Introduction: Aporia and Affirmative Critique,’ in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (Oxford: Routledge 2016) 17.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2014), 49–50.

The act of congregation evokes and co-locates our shared ethical responsibilities. A curated encounter with moral and ethical rupture can capacitate consciousness, and thus we return awakened to the forces that oppress other human beings. I further argue human rights theatre uses the coalescence process of *sentience* – this felt-understanding – to leave us not just with ‘sad and sentimental stories’ but to affect a form of embodied and lived change.⁵

Like human rights themselves, my definition of human rights theatre is in process, intentionally contingent and provisional, adaptive to emerging circumstances. In my introduction, I proposed three hypothetical qualities of human rights theatre: firstly, works that depict real-world political events and issues, highlighting the role of the state in endangering or protecting its citizens; secondly, as a place where moral and ethical ruptures are encountered within and without the dramatic frame through the staging and playing out of victim/perpetrator dynamics; and finally, plays within this purview seek to have an activist effect on the collective behaviours of the audience, prompting them to adjust their lived responses after the event. Through the process of this investigation, I align my human rights theatre framework to human rights reconciliation processes predicated on principles of authenticity, bearing witness and activation, and have argued it is the interaction of these elements that distinguish this as a practice.⁶ Along with other exemplary performance events and texts, I contend my selected case-studies adhere to this framing mechanism, and I demonstrate the productive value of bringing these characteristics into direct conversation to capture the specific affective qualities of human rights theatre. I have argued that through the recovery of human stories from overbearing political discourse and re-scaling of the rights problem, there can be *sentient* identification of other humans as rights-holders. This re-

⁵ Richard Rorty, ‘Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality,’ in *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, eds. S. Shute, & S. Hurel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119.

⁶ Sigrid Weigel and Sybille Krämer, ‘Introduction: Converging the Yet-Separate Theoretical Discourses of Testimony Studies,’ in *Testimony/bearing Witness: Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture*, eds. Krämer and Weigel (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 8.

calibration to the personal permits reflection on the political, enabling a coming-to-consciousness of power structures. Through the rich seam of discussion generated by the identification and exploration of the traits of a distinctive human rights theatre, I affirm the value of this typological enquiry. Moreover, as a result of my close-reading of the purposes, processes and productions in this study, I also identify below caveats and avenues for further enquiry to advance this provisional paradigm.

Although this is not a comparative thesis, I would highlight some productive similarities between the approaches illuminated by the case-studies, as the artists spatially configure their text, orchestrate interrelated bodies, and find ways to reach across to the audience. I note discernible differences in the relative æfficacy of different methodologies to engender consciousness and communicate rights messages. I observe that gelid, arms-length treatments can fail to provoke *sentience* by presenting apparently untouchable worlds, and those which prioritise representations of authenticity can confound their own ethical intent by seeking to erase the shielding aesthetic architecture. Conversely, a surfeit of sensation and an over-saturation of representative material in the frame can cause structural blindness and be counterproductive in the transition to consciousness. Requests to participate can build new communities towards a collective consciousness, but also place ethical-stress on belonging and identity, building in-groups where old hierarchies are duplicated, as well as reverting to templated modes of activism that attempt to sway consciousness through prescriptive ideology. Overall, I argue for a human rights theatre that privileges supple scaling through dramaturgical, aesthetic, and embodied mechanisms, to preserve the *sentience*-raising potency of human detail whilst allowing scope to comprehend the macro-perspectives of structure and causality. I also celebrate human rights theatre which consciously frames its relationship to the proxy bodies, sites and stories transported into the theatre space, making room for an active, ethical participation through all stages of making. The subjects of my

case-studies use interlocking vocabularies of performance to challenge intransigence in discourse, to engender a discernible shift in thinking – even when playing to sympathetic audiences – and to draw lines of connection between larger power structures and their impact on individuals, not only to ‘speak truth unto power’ but to restore the capacity and ethico-political responsibility to witness and speak of what we have seen.

Chapter One explored the conceptualisation of human rights theatre through an examination of testimonial-verbatim theatre where the recounting of another’s injurious experience is intended to bring an audience to consciousness through the persuasive process of embodied storytelling. This chapter analysed the phenomenological premise of understanding another’s experience through the re-bodied knowledge of testimony performed; it uncovered tensions between the privileging of an individual traumatic story as the unit-currency of discourse, and the need for broader, relational political evaluation. I focused on ice&fire’s ‘Actors for Human Rights’ programme and considered its explicit claims to explore human rights issues under a free-roaming purview of work that claims moral justification to testify from overseas wars, to track migratory journeys, speak for the dispossessed and mark the domestic indignities of human rights disputes in Britain. For AfHR, actors are delegated as proxy bodies to embody and perform the ‘truth’ of these real stories, engendering a roomful of secondary witnesses, conscientized to ethico-political commitment. I considered the evocation of the ‘real’ in human rights theatre through an examination of AfHR’s process, product, and aesthetic which signals its lack of mediation. The aesthetic foregrounds the persuasive power of chronologised words, with the script as a performing artefact that is, at points, intended to subordinate the representational work of the performing actor. This is effect-heavy theatre, with the ‘performance’ of the event extending across the gathering and dispersal phases to emphasise state structural responsibilities and generate direct campaigning opportunities. Liability or play in performance is demoted, to

reconnect audiences with the simple prose of lived-experiences, in the hope this relinking will enable those audiences' full comprehension of the need to protect the rights of others. AfHR privileges a conceptually imaginative transaction between text and audience, where *sentience* is generated through the long-lines of storytelling. In asking the viewer to imagine the life of the other, the audience are maintained at a hypothetical distance; the role of the viewer becomes philanthropist, but also a potential agent of change.⁷ The charismatic function of the 'I' locution bolsters the conceit these are words channelled from the original body, offering an act of corporeal substitution where the narrative purports to be arterially transported to the performance space. Through a detailed investigation of witness and testimony, I considered the work of AfHR in the context of persistent charges of appropriating the traumatic stories of others to make cultural capital. However, this thesis also argues for the surrogate actor as an ethical construct where the repetition of traumatic narratives is distributed and shared across several avatar bodies, designated the collective responsibility to speak in the interest of wider consciousness. Like Schaffer and Smith, I suggest that to narrate the lives of others is motivated by 'an ethics of recognition' and that amid official human rights frameworks, 'personal storytelling' can continue to 'command attention, however unpredictable or inadequate, and to call on people around the world to listen and to act'.⁸

Chapter Two examined experiential approaches to human rights theatre which attempt to situate the audience as proximate to the human rights crisis, embedding the spectator within the disaster event to provide a sensual experience of suffering. Here, the proposition is the curation of fear and sensory disruption will create a hyper-animated *sentient* response

⁷ Amy Shuman, *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 7.

⁸ Kay Schaffer and Sidone Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 12.

bringing an audience to consciousness over the unfolding catastrophe. In this politicised reworking of environmental theatre, the landscapes are hostile; in this experience machine, the experiences are those of torment. I explored two case-studies: Steve Lambert's Badac Theatre Company, and Jonathan Holmes' Jericho House, both with comparable but distinct approaches to the conflagration of the performance space, both focusing on violations of Civil and Political rights to situate their dramas in the human extremis. Here we find makers stretching out the last syllable of their theatre vocabulary, curating a *mise-en-scène* to foster extreme arousal and stimulate the psycho/somatic involvement of the audience. There are ethical claims made in the works of Lambert and Holmes, so the experiences on stage and among the audience are not those of *mere suffering*, instead, a confrontation with the structural mechanisms of authority which generate these modern tragedies.⁹ This version of a human rights theatre privileges sensorial and visceral modes of knowing, where *sentience* is stimulated through affect-rich worlds. The mechanism of consciousness operates on the principle that through an embodied encounter with the fear and degradation of others, we will be motivated to ensure these violations are not repeated. Affect is seen as an interstitial force, which exists in liminal spaces and challenges dualities, 'collapsing binaries of spectator and actor'.¹⁰ In a foreshadowing of the final chapter, these case-studies reveal a desire to affect all animate relationships in the performance moment; utilising the audience as a generative contagion-tool, prioritising 'productive participation' to create ripples of felt-understanding and somatic virality to disseminate messages.¹¹ The tension observed in this sensory saturation pitches individualistic response against collective concurrence. Continuing the

⁹ Schiller takes up the question of the aesthetic value of suffering; 'Portrayal of suffering—as mere suffering—is never the end of art', he says, 'but as a means to this end it is of the utmost importance to art'. See: Friedrich Schiller, 'On the Pathetic,' *Essays*, eds. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 45.

¹⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans J.I. Saska Iris, (London: Routledge, 2008), 8.

¹¹ Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

analytical strand of ethical-stress created through representation and recreation of human rights crisis, this chapter argued that surfeit of *sentience* created in some works becomes politically unpredictable, with spectators overwhelmed or incredulous by the asserted responsibility to witness simulated events. This chapter also demonstrated the potential efficacies of reconfiguring spaces where audiences might have a less hierarchical and formal relationship with the artwork, with a proximity promising a greater agency of perspective, and potential for audiences to become emancipated spectators.

Chapter Three analysed participatory modes to investigate another expression of human rights theatre, where ‘kinaesthetic knowledge and understanding’ is deployed to deliver affective practice.¹² This chapter focussed on applied theatre modalities to understand the working methods of ACT NOW, the young people’s theatre programme at Cardboard Citizens, and Tony Cealy’s practice with The Black Men’s Consortium. The chapter examined participation from the dual perspective of individuals taking part in the process of making, extending this out to audience members invited to actively participate and contribute to the content of the performance. In gathering individuals together to make work over time, the process of *sentience* is revealed as a shifting, durational phenomenon. In this vector of human rights theatre, rights-enabling vocabularies are brought together with cultural rights assertion through performance to transform participants via a process of conscientisation into rights-claiming individuals. This coming-to-consciousness is also demonstrated as a rights-empowerment mechanism for audiences. Here the act of surrogacy and embodiment is not solely subcontracted to the onstage actor, as in Chapter One, where the audience are distanced witnesses; nor the result of a uniform designation of the audience as matrixed witnesses, as in Chapter Two; but instead, the audience is encouraged to become

¹² Nicola Shaughnessy, *Applying Performance: Live Art, Socially Engaged Theatre and Affective Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6.

a part of the action and alter the outcomes of the drama. This chapter highlights the aspiration for a collective consciousness where the objective is for the audience to coalesce and seek consensus in response to issues of human rights abuse – although still permitting heterogenous solutions – as distinct from the intentional fragmentation of the audience group to foster emotional contagion shown in the previous chapter. Although there is a concentration on the work of Boal and Forum Theatre as participatory practices in this chapter, I also highlight how aesthetics and value placed on theatrical craft are intended to return a right of expression for oppressed participants. In this final chapter, I also discuss the inclusion of personal testimony and forms of life-writing where often vulnerable members of the participatory group are asked to reveal something of their life-story. I examine the aesthetic tools used to place scaffolding around these activities to maintain consistent ethical boundaries. I also find purposeful slippage, and extra-curricular playfulness, in the practice of this human rights theatre that asserts survival and regeneration. This chapter therefore picks up many of the discussions on affect through human rights theatre of the previous chapter but finds a more consensually rights-inflected ‘distribution of the sensible’ through the span of the practice and participants.¹³

This thesis has offered an exploration of British theatre at a specific period in time to conduct a deep and durational analysis of work. A productive extension of this investigation would be to examine the applicability of my hypothesis to a range of international case-studies, particularly in locations with non-western theatre cultures, or where human rights might be more of a contested claim. In my working paradigm of a human rights theatre, I would additionally propose analytical emphasis on the extra-textual framing of performance

¹³ Rancière argues the 'distribution of the sensible' refers to a regime of what is possible and acknowledged: the felt, heard, seen, and perceived within this space, implicated in familiar patterns, inclusions, and exclusions. This aesthetic regime orders the sensible so that art and life no longer appear separate from each other. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 15.

where connections to the ‘real’ are often made, and suggest further enquiry is needed here into the operations of the authenticating ‘halo of truth’ around the performances. I would also be interested to enhance these readings of the multi-layered discrepancies, complexities, and contested contingencies of ‘truth’ in the context of restorative justice, where ‘factual or forensic truth’, ‘personal or narrative truth’, ‘social or “dialogue” truth’, and ‘healing and restorative truth’ overlap in ways that highlight the plurality of perspectives on truth and authenticity in human rights theatre.¹⁴ Furthermore, I am aware that although questions of ‘ethics’ have been dominant in this thesis, there is no agreed standard of ethical practice cited in my proposed paradigm; this has allowed my consideration of pieces that depict ethical rupture within the drama but might test ethical assumptions elsewhere. In uncovering the ethical tensions encountered – questions of bodily autonomy, appropriation, surrogacy, informed consent, cultural hegemony – this thesis also illuminates the need to consider an outer-frame ethics for a human rights theatre.

It is not within the purview of this thesis to offer commentary on the overall value-system of the human rights project, or whether it might be ‘right’ or desirable for a human rights theatre to have an activist impact on the audience and create those ‘transportations’ which will provoke lasting change.¹⁵ However, the research underlying this thesis has also been witness to profound moments of transformation and (renewed) consciousness of individual rights ownership and a collective celebration of rights-claiming. Through the course of documenting this practice, I return to my hypothesis of theatre as the placed/no-placed utopian space and wish to record that through some of these pieces I have seen hope restored. I therefore position human rights theatre in dialogue with Jill Dolans’ formulation of a utopian theatre which aims to ‘persuade us that beyond this “now” of material oppression

¹⁴ South Africa, ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa report,’ (Cape Town: The Commission, 1999), Chapter 5, 110.

¹⁵ Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 12.

and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we are seared by the promise of a present that gestures towards a better later'.¹⁶

¹⁶ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at The Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 2005), 6.

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