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Acting Alone - Can one person make a difference?

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Re-Enacting Palestine and the Performance of Credibility

Introductory comments:

- [Slide] This presentation I am discussing *Acting Alone* which I saw at staged at Auckland University as part of the International Applied Theatre Symposium 'Performance of Hope' in November 2015.
- I want to acknowledge Ava's generosity in providing me with a copy of the unpublished script that I will be referencing in my talk.
- The performance is being presented on Thursday the 16th in the Lunch Break.
- I'm theorising the difference between authenticity and credibility. This is a work in progress so please do give feedback.

The performance *Acting Alone* (2015) begins with solo performer Ava Hunt approaching the stage and hesitating at the threshold that separates audience and playing area. Standing on the stage periphery, yet in full view of the audience, Hunt stares at the empty stage and delivers her opening lines:

I get really nervous. You're the reason I get nervous. It's the audience that does it. Being up there on the stage. I don't want to die up there, hopefully no one will die – I'm terrified it all might go horribly wrong. (Hunt and Branson, 2015, 1).

The trepidation that Hunt describes in her opening address is more than a passing reference to 'butterflies in the stomach' that performers routinely contend with. *Acting Alone* is not just a show about performing solo. Commissioned by Amnesty International (Derbyshire), the performance tells the stories of some of the people Hunt met on a visit to the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 2013. The performance also weaves together personal anecdotes of Hunt's experiences as an actor with mythical parables. These folkloric tales work as a dramaturgical device to help balance the specificity of Hunt's personal experience with certain universal appeals. As the programme explains, *Acting Alone* asks questions of its audience such as: 'how do we stand up for what we believe in? What are we willing to risk? Can one person actually make a difference?' (Branson, 2015).

After hesitating, Hunt enters the playing area and continues to express her anxieties to the audience:

Have I done my research, am I well prepared? Do I know enough? What if in trying to speak out I just reveal my ignorance? 'She doesn't know what she's talking about'. 'Who is she to have an opinion?' 'Who is she to tell this story?' The fear of not knowing enough can be paralyzing (Hunt and Branson, 2015, 1).

[Slide] Delivered while she contends with the 'empty' playing area, Hunt's apprehensions are underscored by the contradictory understanding that when it comes to the issue of Palestine she is stepping into an often congested and contested space. Any audience member attending a theatre production engaging with Palestinian experiences will bring preconceived notions shaped by the

history and ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Edward Said has noted: 'So ideologically saturated is the question of Palestine, so manifestly present is it to most people who come to deal with it, that even a superficial or cursory apprehension of it involves a position taken, an interest defended, a claim or right asserted. There is no indifference, no objectivity, no neutrality, because there is simply no room for them in a space that is as crowded and over determined as this one' (Said, E. quoted in Cox & Connell, 2003, p. 329).

Theatre of the Real and the Authentic?

[Slide] In some ways *Acting Alone* might fall under the category of 'Theatre of the Real' (Martin, 2013), which includes genres such as documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, and theatre of witness, among others. According to Martin, in this kind of theatre there is an obsession with forming and reframing what has really happened: 'there is the desire to produce what Roland Barthes dubbed the "reality effect" which works to confer legitimacy upon the artwork as well as the sense that 'what is represented is real or has a relationship with what is real' (2013, 5). Moreover, I would argue that this obsession with 'the real' is often conflated with the 'authentic' and this imposes particular limitations on aesthetic style. This often results in documentary performances that are stripped-back, minimalist, static presentation that resort to the 'objectivity' of realism, and which can limit, rather than encourage, engagement by audiences. Julie Salverson describes how in attempting to be faithful to the integrity of a particular story, theatre practitioners often run the risk of resorting to an 'idealisation of authenticity' which emerges at the expense of aesthetic or theatrical forms considered as impositions or distortions to the re-telling project (Salverson 184). Salverson's comments reflect a general concern in theatre scholarship seeking to problematise claims to 'authenticity' in documentary theatre projects which purport to represent unmediated access to 'real' stories (Irmer; Bothan; Bottoms; Martin, 2006).¹

Authenticity Vs Credibility

The discourse surrounding the performance of real and the authentic makes it difficult to reconcile the underlying rhetorical imperatives of documentary theatre with the claims of 'one-sidedness' that sometimes emerge in the divide separating the factual document from its theatrical representation. This is a persuasive genre of theatre that often inaugurates truth claims in an effort to influence audiences in particular ways. As playwright Peter Weiss contends, 'documentary theatre takes sides. Many of its themes inevitably demand judgment. In such a theatre, objectivity is apt to be a concept used by a ruling group to excuse its actions' (Weiss, 251).

[Slide] My own contention is that theatre is the 'craft of make-belief' and I am particularly interested in the rhetorical strategies enlisted in documentary

¹ As such, and according to Forsyth and Megson, much documentary theatre has now 'complicated notions of authenticity with a more nuanced and challenging evocation of the 'real' (2009, 2)

theatre as a persuasive art form. I am interested in how we might think of these sets of theatre practices as performance interventions that deploy theatricality, mise-en-scene, and aspects of stage-craft to create 'believability'. I am also interested in how this believability can move audiences emotionally and experientially as a precursor to ongoing political engagement. Instead of a focus on the real and the authentic, in this paper I want to focus a bit more attention on the notion of 'credibility'.² Discussing credibility as a combination of trustworthiness and expertise, I am hoping to argue that Hunt's performance enlists the craft of make-believe in an attempt to persuade audiences to engage with Palestinian realities that might normally be marginalised and excluded from public discourse.

[Slide] Credibility = Trustworthiness + Expertise

While 'credibility' has been theorised in fields of media studies and communications for more than fifty years (Pornpitakpan 2004), it remains a particularly neglected concept in the field of performance and theatre studies. In his book *Persuasive Technology* (2002) B.J Fogg argues that 'simply put, "credibility" can be defined as believability' (122). But this simple definition belies the complex and sophisticated studies carried out in the fields of social psychology and media studies that suggest there may be a multiplicity of factors that contribute to credibility evaluations.

Daniel O'Keefe defines credibility as, 'judgements made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator' (O'Keefe, 1990, 130-131). Robert Gass and John Seiter suggest that an important feature of O'Keefe's definition is 'the recognition that credibility is a *receiver-based construct*' (Gass and Seiter, 2014, 77). Credibility is a perceived phenomenon that resides in the receiver not the source and it is also a multidimensional construct that is situational (ibid, 77-78). The way we understand what is credible is based on a number of qualities and can change depending on the context. Yet while there are lots of factors that can impact on credibility, there is an emerging consensus that two key primary dimensions of credibility are 'trustworthiness' and 'expertise' (Fogg 2002: 123; Gass and Seiter, 2014, 78-80; Pornpitakpan 2004: 244).

[Slide: Poster] Performing Expertise

According to Fogg expertise is related to 'the perceived knowledge, skill, and experience of the source' (Fogg 2002: 124). As Gass and Seiter (2014) suggest 'to be credible, a persuader must know his or her stuff, or at least, appear to know his or her stuff' (78). In *Acting Alone*, Hunt takes time to highlight her particular expertise as a performer. In the opening of the play, after acknowledging that the audience is what makes her nervous, Hunt highlights the theatrical contract that underscores her role as performer: I'm here. And you're here. I'm an actor. You're an audience. You're expecting me to act. Those are the rules. You've been

² Authenticity derives from the Greek *authentikos* meaning original, principal or genuine. Credibility, meanwhile, derives from the Latin *credibilis* meaning to believe (Hazou 2011).

promised a performance' (unpublished script, 1). Indeed, it was her profession as an actor that first took her to Palestine in 2013, when Hunt and director Maggie Ford visited the occupied territories to conduct research for a stage adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's *The Kites are Flying* (2009). After returning to the UK and presenting Morpurgo's story, Hunt began exploring the possibility of devising her own performance about her experiences in Palestine (Coffey, 2015). As well as referencing the adaptation Morpurgo's *The Kites are Flying* at the start of the play, Hunt also recounts her experience staging an adaptation of Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*. She also elaborates on the challenges she has faced in the acting profession, including a humiliating bath scene for a women's ageing soap commercial which she admits to have shamefully accepted for the money.

The performance also attempts to highlight Hunt's expertise by referencing her knowledge of the Palestinian context, and in particular the Palestinian theatre makers and companies she encountered during her travels in the Occupied Territories. The play recounts her experience travelling through security at Ben Gurion airport, visiting Dr. Abdelfattah Abusrour and the Alrowwad Cultural and Theatre Training Society (ACTS). Alrowwad, which means 'the pioneers' in Arabic, was established in 1998 and employs a strategy of 'beautiful resistance' that informs all the various theatre and creative activities that ACTS provide (Hazou, 2012, 137). *Acting Alone* also recounts Hunt's experience attending the Freedom Bus, an initiative of the Freedom Theatre based in Jenin Refugee Camp. The theatre was co-founded in 2006 by the late Jewish-Palestinian theatre director and political activist Juliano Mer Khamis,³ former Jenin chief of the Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade Zakaria Zubeidi and Swedish activist Jonatan Stanczak.⁴ The Freedom Bus utilises Playback Theatre and 'cultural activism to bear witness, raise awareness and build alliances throughout occupied Palestine and beyond' (The Freedom Bus Website). The Freedom Bus initiative typically engages Palestinians and Internationals in multi-day events that occur in geographic sites of popular struggle against the Israeli occupation. Since its inception in December 2011, the Freedom Bus has held Playback Theatre events in towns, villages, Bedouin encampments and refugee camps throughout the West Bank (Rivers, 2013, 159-60). In the play Hunt describes her experience travelling on the Freedom Bus to a village and hearing a farmer share his story about his encounter with Israeli soldier's who refused to let his goats drink from the local well. Hunt returns to this incident and the playback performance at the end of the performance in order to emphasise the need 'to act' in response to stories and experiences of injustice. In this way, the performance is at its heart asking audiences to consider the impact one person might have on the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

³ In April 2011, Juliano Mer Khamis was assassinated in the courtyard of the theatre. It remains unclear exactly who was responsible for his murder.

⁴ Since its establishment, the Freedom Theatre has become an internationally recognized symbol of cultural resistance within Palestine. The theatre has toured several highly acclaimed productions through Europe and the United States, and has helped to raise awareness about the oppressive realities of life under Israeli Occupation and the Palestinian Authority (Rivers, 2013, 159).

Importantly, Gass and Seiter point out that although we tend to think of expert sources as being highly confident this is not always the case: 'sources who already possess high credibility may be more influential when they express their opinions with less certainty...' (80). I think this is why I personally found the opening of *Acting Alone* compelling. The performance was credible precisely because it was tentative. It was not framed as a western female activist who is rushing into this space offering solutions. Rather, I was inclined to be receptive to Hunt's experience precisely because it was speculative and uncertain.

Performing Trustworthiness

Gass and Seiter suggest that 'to be successful, persuaders must convey an impression of honesty and integrity' (80). Similarly, according to Fogg a trustworthy source is one that is 'perceived to be truthful, fair, and unbiased' (Fogg 2002: 123). There are several components of the play that can be interpreted as an effort to present an unbiased view. The play includes the examples of two 'fearless women' committed to justice who have inspired Hunt and who in some ways straddle certain allegiances across the Palestinian/Israeli divide. In the play Hunt recounts the experiences of Irena Sendler, a Catholic social worker who smuggled approximately 2,500 Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi occupation. The second inspiring woman is Rachel Corrie, the young American activist who travelled to Gaza in late January 2003 as a volunteer with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), and was killed by an Israeli bulldozer when attempting to defend a Palestinian home from being demolished (IMEU 'Fact Sheet' 2013).⁵ By presenting both Sendler and Corrie as role models and inspirations, Hunt attempts to position herself and the performance as being non-partisan and instead committed to principles of social justice.

The emphasis on an unbiased performance is also attempted through the recounting of Prof. Nurit Peled-Elhanan's research into Israeli school textbooks and how from an early age the Israeli education system indoctrinates and cultivates anti-Arab racism. Professor of language and education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Peled-Elhanan's thirteen-year-old daughter was also a victim of a Jerusalem suicide bombing attack. In the play Hunt explains that at the time of her daughter's death, instead of seeking revenge Peled-Elhanan declared that 'no real mother would want this to happen to another mother. Motherhood is a uniting force, it cuts through religion, it cuts through any differences' (Hunt and Branson, 2015, 15). Her presence in the play might be understood as an attempt to gesture towards a non-partisan approach as a way of performing trustworthiness. I think analysing the performance through the framework of credibility helps focus on establishing trustworthiness rather

⁵ In 2005, British actor Alan Rickman and editor of Guardian Weekend Magazine Katherine Viner put together a monodrama entitled *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*, using Rachel's diaries, journals, and the e-mails she wrote from Gaza as their source material. Rickman himself directed the play's London premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in April 2005. In October of the same year, the play was revived at the Playhouse Theatre in the West End. This same production was scheduled to travel to the US and open at the New York Theater Workshop in March 2006. This never happened as the performances were postponed indefinitely 'because of concerns about the show's political content' (El Lozy 105).

gesturing towards impartiality. The difference is that impartiality suggests a kind of emotional detachment and objectivity that again contradicts the rhetorical nature of the documentary form which attempts to persuade audiences to take a stand.

Conclusion

I would argue that the focus on the real and the authentic continue to limit theatre thinking and practice by threatening to constantly drag theatre scholarship into a vortex of verisimilitude where the value of the theatrical work is constantly evaluated and critiqued in how closely it resembles or corresponds to 'reality'. I think the problem is that this can sometimes result in criticism that fails to account for the mechanisms of power that construct and maintain the status quo and normative 'reality'. This is important because at least when it comes to documentary theatre, as Derek Paget has argued, these are practices that typically reassess 'official' histories and celebrate 'repressed or marginalised communities and groups' (2009, 227-228).⁶

In the opening moments of the play, Hunt expresses her fear about being accused of speaking out in ignorance, of having an audience member say 'She doesn't know what she's talking about' (Hunt and Branson, 2015, 1). Despite this open acknowledgement of the issue of credibility in the opening scene, the issue of bias nevertheless emerged early in the show's production history. Funded by Arts Council England, together with research funding from University of Derby, *Acting Alone* initially premiered in 2015 at Derby Theatre before being staged at the Nottingham Playhouse (Coffey, 2015). During the second night's performance at the Nottingham Playhouse (3 July 2015) two women in the audience continued to interject and disrupt the performance - at one point calling out 'lies, lies' (Hunt, personal communication, 11 January 2016). As Hunt explained in email correspondence, 'apart from the folklores everything in the script was true, it happened to me, I was there. But to them [the two women], from their oppositional ideology it was not the truth and they could not control themselves to keep these responses to themselves' (ibid).

The discourse of the real and the authentic only goes so far in illuminating the reaction from these two audience members. Instead, I hope that the brief framing of the performance in terms of credibility that I have provided here might better explain why these two particular women didn't find Hunt's performance to be believable. In the end, it is not the fidelity to the 'real' that matters here. Rather, it is Hunt's perceived trustworthiness and expertise.

⁶ This is particularly relevant in the Palestinian context given for all the writing about them, Palestinians remain virtually unknown. [...] We have experienced a great deal that has not been recorded. Many of us have been killed, many permanently scarred and silenced, without a trace. And the images used to represent us only diminish our reality further. For most people Palestinians are visible principally as fighters, terrorists, and lawless pariahs. Say the word 'terror' and a man wearing a Kaffiyah and mask and carrying a Kalashnikov immediately leaps before one's eyes. To a degree, the image of a helpless, miserable-looking refugee, has been replaced by this menacing one as the veritable icon of 'Palestinian' Edward Said, 1986, 4.

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