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Human rights, participatory theatre and regional publics: Acting Alone and A Story to Tell

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Human Rights, Participatory Theatre and Regional Publics:
Acting Alone and A Story To Tell

Abstract: (260 words)

This paper explores how artists are continuing to develop new participatory theatre models that address social and political issues within a human rights arena. Using my productions *Acting Alone* and *A Story to Tell*, as its primary case studies, the paper will examine how efficacy can be created with community audiences by experimenting with forms of **participatory**, autobiographical and verbatim theatre. *Acting Alone* is a monologue performance about Palestinian refugee camps from the perspective of a mother and artist, and *A Story to Tell* is a **verbatim** first-hand account of refugees in Greece.

Informed by current **refugee theatre**, theory and practice, this paper asks how artists might use performance to engage audiences in **revolutionary thinking** in relation to immigration, refugees and human rights issues. **Boal's** premise that theatre is a weapon for revolution will be drawn on; however, when audiences may not be directly positioned as oppressed or oppressor, what other concerns are raised? If refugee stories are presented without political advocacy, they run the risk of reinforcing images of refugees as victims and spectator as voyeur or **by-stander**. How might we appropriate Boal's work to contemporary western theatre practice to promote engagement with complex international issues and awareness of our shared responsibility towards **human rights** – in spite of cultural and geographical distance from the issues presented? What action can be taken? Graffiti on the streets of Athens last summer declared 'Our grandparents were refugees. Our parents were migrants. We have become racists' (unknown 2016). How can theatre be a revolutionary voice to address these global and national questions?

The human rights performance work that I have produced over the last eight years has focused on a single question: **Can One Person make a Difference?** This paper sets out the **process** of creating two bespoke applied theatre performances, for Amnesty International and the **timing** of both productions and their relation to emergent world events which were impossible to predict at the time of commissioning. I will be focusing on the performer/audience relationship through the use of participation, testimony and verbatim material and how this might create revolutionary action for regional publics.

Acting Alone (2014-16) (AA) was a solo performance verbatim piece based on my personal experience in Palestine exploring stories of direct action within the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. *A Story to Tell* (2016) (ASTT) was a rehearsed reading of first-hand accounts of action taken by members of the Wirksworth community which performed as part of the Wirksworth Arts Festival. I will refer to the audience at the Festival as a *community /interested* audience in as much as the size of the town (5,000 people) means residents have a strong sense of identity and relationship with the area.

Creating Agency in the arena of Human Rights

The protection of human rights for all lies at the heart of Amnesty's values and objectives, and through education and campaigns it is able to raise public awareness and bring pressure to governments to address these issues internationally. Locally, working with Paul Webb (chair) of Amnesty Wirksworth District, this includes: speakers at meetings, fundraising activities, increasing public knowledge and understanding and direct-action through letter/email writing, petitions.

Theatre productions using testimony and verbatim are frequently created for Amnesty by artists that have a geographical connection to the issue. I was interested in researching how to make human rights theatre that would not only use testimony and verbatim material from a by-stander position but also employed Boalian or participatory theatre as 'taken together....they hint at the range of human rights-related theatre whose impetus is basically humanist' (Rae 2009:18) but with artists and a community that was maybe not geographically connected.

Most of my professional practice has involved creating performances or workshops promoting social change and political and social justice. For Kershaw (1999) when radical theatre is presented in non-theatre community venues it can engage with vital social and political issues of the time. He suggests that Brechtian methods of exploring the radical offer audiences access and engagement in political discourse. Both shows would be staged using a stripped back theatricality, participation and with one question at the heart: 'Can one person make a difference? This question was pertinent to the values and objectives of Amnesty and would facilitate the community to engage with complex human rights issues from a grass roots level onto an international stage.

My research methodology employed whilst making AA was Practice as Research (PaR) as I would be drawing on my direct experience of theatre in Palestine using both testimony and verbatim material. The critical and reflexive tools that are needed to calibrate the research expectations are as varied as applied theatre itself, however working as practitioner/researcher and using first person accounts requires processes that need to be

both flexible and malleable. Outcomes and impact justifying the value of applied theatre can be ephemeral and difficult to evidence (Hughes et al 2011). However, PaR allowed me as a practitioner to use embodied knowledge as performer/writer, critical knowledge as an academic, and first-hand experience as a witness of events in Palestine. This multiplicity, along with working closely with director/dramaturg Tilly Branson, would produce 'a triangulation between three different kinds of knowledge' (Allegue et al 2009:26). PaR allows the performer/writer to be at the heart of the performance intervention contributing to pedagogical interfaces with research and audience receptivity. Creating theatre from testimony and verbatim material provides credibility and enables a visceral authentic voice that goes beyond merely reportage by placing the author in the role of historian (Barrett).

Refugee as Spectacle: Spectator and Spect-Actor

Presenting complex issues around immigration and refugees for Wirksworth's mainly white audience opens up a gamut of hazards. Placing refugees on stage in an exposing space runs the risk of reinforcing the notion of deserving victim, and conversely places the audience in the role of voyeur in a theatre of 'erotic injury'. But Salverson also suggests that this can ignore the role the artist plays in the re-telling of violent acts contributing to a commodification of trauma for audiences. The use of refugee testimony and verbatim material read by actors from a privileged and safe position also politically compromises credibility to produce a 'dampening effect of empathy' (Dennis 2008: 1) by re-enforcing the absent – the invisible refugee - the unseen. As Balfour articulates listening to refugee stories can also leave audiences feeling overwhelmed and 'contaminated by the catastrophe' (2015: 172). It was essential therefore, that the pieces balanced **feeling** with **empowerment** so audiences felt able to consider political action – or any action that was appropriate to them and that there was a '**continuum of action**' available – which I will return to later. The balance of testimony and participation would create both performance effects and affects (Thompson 2011) and as Dolan proposes it's important that audiences are both able to feel and think politically to 'reinvest our energies in a different future, one full of hope and reanimated by a new, more radical humanism' (2005: 2).

But I was interested in shifting the paradigm away from oppressed refugee to that of **by-stander** – to use testimony of the artist as by-stander /interventionist for our audience of mainly by-standers. Amnesty's Paul Webb was also keen to present an alternative perspective – 'we know the stories of refugees - we read about them every day in the newspapers we see the images on TV every evening' (Webb 2016) there were other stories to tell, such as 'our response to the crisis by members of our local community [which] had not been represented sufficiently, if at all' (Webb). Therefore the opportunity to present first-hand accounts of actions taken by some members of the community would facilitate and deepen the discourse of direct action.

The invitation to participate on a **continuum of action** engage with refugee discourse would be important to counter the feelings that audiences may be left with recognising that 'to do nothing, to voice no concern, would signal acceptance ...and therefore implicate viewers in

the forces of exclusion' (Hazou 2008: 5). The driving force behind the creation process of both AA and ASTT was the invitation for action: empowerment and engagement of spect-actors to engage in discourse— where the theatre would provide a rehearsal for life, social change, revolution (Boal 1979). Nicholson (2011) argues Boal's premise of *spectatorship as passive* has undermined Ranciere's theory of *spectatorship as pedagogy* however, this is not a binary and in this paper I will be suggesting that new models of participation need to be explored in relation to human rights theatre. These models can be spectator/witness and/or spect-actor/activist – I will use both terms spectator and spect-actor (Boal) at different times to recognise the intentions of the performance or participatory elements. As both AA and ASTT were commissioned by Amnesty for a community audience who may be familiar with each other, have a keen interest or prior existing knowledge of the issues, it was important to recognise that we were **not** playing to a passive audience. The performances would need to be entertaining, affecting, offer unique insight and open up complex arguments into which, as with AA, the spect-actors could play a central role by crossing the dramaturgical divide (Boal). Although Forum Theatre created by Augusto Boal (1979) was primarily used to explore oppressor/oppressed relationships it has been used to explore the complicity of the bystander, and I will return to this question. We live in a complex global economy where news and information are immediately available. So how does theatre for audiences in the United Kingdom, for example, create global citizenship? How can human rights theatre create meaningful participation?

At the heart of ASTT is Woodhouse's testimony, a firefighter who risks his life on a daily basis, and his story of how he rescued a drowning baby off the coast of Lesbos. Recalling this event on stage was risky for him having never addressed a live audience before as well as traumatic for audiences to witness. In contrast in AA, my testimony, as an actor, of witnessing oppression in Palestine, explored the risks I was reluctant to take i.e. *non-action*, and the ethical, moral and personal dilemmas embodied in the question – 'what else could I have done?' With AA, Branson and I wanted the audience to identify with my *unheroic* acts, encouraging audiences to navigate through the fear of action and how this feeling stops many from entering the fray. Thus the use of testimony, as a way of ensuring that spectators are not passive and are engaged in a joint pedagogy, whilst drawing on Audience in Performance theory (AIP) which recognises the audience/performer relationship is not unilateral but 'enrich[es] the quality of interaction/dialogue' (Prendergast 2004: 46).

Case Study 1: Acting Alone

Writing for AA began in May 2014 with Branson and myself meeting regularly to develop ideas, however, by July violence had erupted along the Israel/Gaza border, escalating to a full military offensive known as Operation Protective Edge which 'lasted fifty days with shockingly aggressive action by the Israeli forces and calls from the international communities following brutal killings of Palestinian civilians – mostly children (2,104 Palestinian civilians were killed compared to six Israeli civilians)' (BBC website 2016). AA would present stories of real Palestinian people's lives under occupation as a counter argument against the dominant media bias and racist discourse of representation of Palestinian's as terrorists (Palestine in Israeli School Books, Peled-Elhanan 2012). Although historically the United Kingdom was a

part of the construction of Israel (1947) and therefore responsible for many of the seeds of current Israeli/Palestinian conflict, it remains, for many UK citizens, of little relevance or importance. However, Amnesty's presence in continuing to call for justice remains an important campaign 'The innocent imprisoned. Movement restricted. Trade suffocated. Homes demolished. Human rights abuses are rife in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories' (Amnesty website 2017). Allan Hogarth, Head of Amnesty's Policy and Government Affairs states clearly that since Operation Protective Edge Israel has not been held accountable for war crimes and notes 'the UK and other EU countries should have the courage to support the Palestinians' quest for justice' (Amnesty website 2017).

The Show

Acting Alone was a solo performance piece performed on an empty stage; characters were differentiated through physicalisation, accent and vocal quality. A soundtrack helped to identify time and place for the different intertwining narratives. These different stories plot my experience in Palestine as well as personal dilemmas. The central narrative draws on my experience of witnessing a Playback theatre performance by Freedom Theatre's 'Freedom Bus Experience', and that of a Palestinian farmer having watched his story performed confronted the audience with 'You listen to our stories but what do you do? You want to help? Then come with me now and stand up to the Israeli soldiers'.

AA used a stripped back theatricality with no costume changes and few props. The piece exploited the possibilities of immediacy; characters appeared and transformed with little introduction, enabling the words to resonate allowing the actor on an empty stage a limitless range of possibilities for a truthful, honest account: 'We must open our empty hands and show that really there is nothing up our sleeves' (Brook 1972: 109). This style of performance together with verbatim material gave the piece credibility enabling audiences to identify with the risks of taking action. The key participatory element was to create an invitation to take action by crossing the dramaturgical divide at the end of the piece. This was achieved by creating subtle moments of participation from the outset. Asking for the audiences help, for example to: cut up quotes, place tea lights in jam jars around the performing area, come up on stage to reclaim string across the space, and culminating with an invitation to complete the performance.

Following the Palestinian farmer's final request for help - to stand up to the IDF and to enable him to get water for his herd of goats the last lines of the show to the audience were:

'He's asking for my help. I'm asking for your help. Help me.

I knew I had to do something, which is why I'm standing here talking to you tonight.

But I don't know how this evening ends. I don't know the answers.

I don't know how we end this show.' (Branson/Hunt 2014:33)

What was evident during the Wirksworth performance and throughout the 33 performances on tour, was that audiences identified with the piece and were *affected* – feeling the intensity of being in that dilemma, feeling the fear as I had done in Palestine. Reports of action came

later from audiences often by email and social media comments including: 'It didn't prick my conscience, it stabbed it.' (Bower 2016) and participation in 'demonstrations', 'petitions', 'joining cultural bans' etc.

It could be argued that the Wirksworth audience were of a similar political demographic sympathetic to the subject material and hence more enthusiastic. In contrast, it is worth noting here that when AA was on tour there were audiences of a more mixed political hue. Oppositional ideologies were sometimes expressed to the performer after the performance verbally or by email communication and once even **during** the performance. I received accusations of contributing to an 'increase [in] the level of anti-Semitism' (email, name withheld, July 2015), that the piece wasn't balanced representing only one side of the story, that it was guilty of presenting incorrect facts and even to the point of being accused of fabricating my experience. As Schaefer observes 'once one moves out of the realm of theorizations, any attempt to unilaterally equate spectators with witnesses collapses under the multivalency of audience reactions' (Schaefer 2003:17).

Some Palestinian audiences were clearly moved by witnessing a piece that was engaging an international audience into taking political action on an issue that for many feels too complex to engage with and fraught with media bias. Theatre critics who reviewed the piece commented:

'poignant, witty, and compellingly thought-provoking one-woman piece ... ingeniously goes against audiences' expectations regarding both the theatre art-form itself and the handling of the overly yet ineffectively debated topic of the sufferings of Palestinians' (Allam 2016)

I will now return to the challenges of using Boal's Forum Theatre (FT) within the context of the by-stander model and how I believe that this was not a methodology that would facilitate the complexities and specifics of AA. The challenge of being effective with our audience was related to performing the piece in the United Kingdom (and therefore lack of direct connection) together with the fact that the conflict's historical complexity was sometimes overwhelmingly challenging. This production was not performing in the West Bank as the theatre piece I had witnessed, so how could we achieve this together with a clear sense of what an international audience could do to make a difference?

FT is most commonly used to explore the oppressor/oppressed relationship, but has been used also in schools, on the subject of bullying, to explore the role of the by-stander: either as complicit with the oppressor or as antagonist to the oppressed. As Day observed when using FT in schools on the subject of refugees the students increased their empathy towards fellow refugee students and there was some behavioural change (Day, 2010). However, the oppressive behaviour being played out in front of students in school has an immediacy – first person enactment which validates the use of FT. With Palestine our audience may or may not be a part of oppressive practices by proxy so to have used FT exploring the role of by-stander, spect-actors would be 'rehearsing' an action from the safety of the United Kingdom and this offers little imperative. The moments of participation that we created with requests 'can you help?' and leading to the final invitation from the Palestinian farmer 'Then come with me now' inviting the audience to cross the dramaturgical divide to finish the show were to

create a performative reality. The invitation to complete the performance was also not facilitated by a Joker as within FT, but remained merely as an invitation to action. This *un-facilitated* invitation then replicated the moment in Palestine when confronted by the farmer.

Questions of what is our responsibility when we are a witness to violations of human rights and can one person make a difference, remained with me. A year later in the context of the refugee crises in Europe, I happened to tune into a local radio station to hear an interview with Derbyshire fire fighter, Brendan Woodhouse, speaking about his response to refugees in Lesbos this formed the central narrative of what would become **A Story to Tell**.

Case Study 2: A Story to Tell

ASTT was commissioned in March 2016 against a backdrop of unprecedented numbers of refugees escaping war and persecution primarily from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Central Africa. According to UNHCR 65 million people (website 2017) across the globe were in transit in 2016. Hundreds of thousands of refugees making perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea to be held in refugee camps across Turkey and Europe. There were reportedly 10,000 people including minors in the illegal refugee camp, The Jungle at Calais, France in appalling conditions. The United Kingdom together with the European Union was failing to respond to this 'crises' which played into the hands of an increasing loud anti-immigration, right wing rhetoric calling for borders to be closed and immigration to be heavily controlled. *ASTT* would present testimonies of local people taking action in support of refugees coming to the United Kingdom to counter the anti-migrant media coverage, which, unmitigated would ultimately play a large part in the Referendum vote for Britain to leave the EU (Miqdaad 2016).

A team of undergraduate actors and myself worked closely with the Amnesty group gathering material from the Wirksworth community as well as conducting additional research and drawing on our own experiences of direct action. This process ensured the piece would provide the audience with immediacy and relevance.

The Show

A Story To Tell - script in hand, read by five actors standing on an empty stage facing audience. This rehearsed play reading of first-hand accounts of people from Wirksworth taking action – experience of volunteering with refugees in the Jungle in Calais, working at Derby Refugee Centre, participation in demonstrations etc. Alongside Brendan Woodhouse, who recalls his personal story of swimming out to sea to rescue a Syrian baby. The piece also included poems, audience participation with an invitation to take action.

Audience participation in *ASTT* consisted of a pre-show activity of plotting audiences own family history: exploring notions of their own migrancy, but the main participatory element of *ASTT* was that of the material itself - poems and stories of work with refugees or protest. This participatory element would not only would empower and validate the actions of those

individuals, attract audience interested in witnessing these un-sung heroes but also illustrate range of possibilities of support or protest on our 'continuum of action'. One member of the acting company, a single mum of a young family, felt unable to help refugees in Calais directly, and through discussion, the realisation that by doing nothing she was contributing to the suffering of other children produced a powerful piece of poetic writing 'My Eyes Have Been Opened'. Other stories included: meeting young children in refugee camps in squalid conditions and a powerful story of attending an anti-war demonstration that was hijacked by Britain First. After the performance there were different actions offered including: to sign up to Amnesty's Emergency campaign #againsthate, joining Amnesty or a collection for Derby Refugee Centre etc.

Salverson warns against the idealisation of 'authenticity' as this often happens at the expense of aesthetics or theatrical form' (1992: 123) and certainly for ASTT this may have been the case with script in hand but for Webb it also provided a way 'of delivering the very personal accounts in an authoritative, engaging way without the potential distress that a personal recounting could induce.' (Webb 2016). The notion of credibility and trustworthiness is an important factor when offering spect-actors an invitation to take action. The combination of first-hand accounts by members of the community, my experience in Palestine and Woodhouse's testimony created a unique documentary theatre event. Having never given testimony of his story to a live audience before, Woodhouse, completed the evening with this climatic moment:

'A five month old baby girl wrapped in a blanket face down in the water with no life jacket at all. I grabbed her and looked at her face. Her eyes were rolled back. She was not breathing. But I knew that she stood a chance. I swam backstroke with her on my chest, facing the stars. I kicked with my legs as fast as I could. With my left hand I paddled and with my right hand I pressed up and down on her chest as I swam. I swam past people screaming for help, I swam past children lost at sea, I swam with everything I had and more. I prayed to a God to whom I never speak to – begging for her life.' (Woodhouse 2015)

Bearing witness to a powerful event in your life to a full live audience can be traumatic and putting people with little or no experience of live performance on stage creates a range of dilemmas for the producer/director. For example, voice projection can be a problem – audiences need to hear what is being said or else the material is rendered ineffective. Woodhouse was able to be heard, although he was clearly shaken by the experience of performance. However, this emotionally truthful testimony also impacted on the audience's receptivity of him. 'Documentary performance opens up possibilities for re-imagining the role of performances as witnesses and in placing those witnesses before an audience, provoking questions about responsibility as well as response-ability to that performance of witness'(Jeffers et al 2011: 92). After the performance audience members remained animated in the space, discussing the stories and impact of the evening. For people who had heard their poems read, or their stories told by the actors it had been an empowering experience. The impact of both the pieces can be evidenced from the actions taken anecdotally: 'You performed the story about Palestine too, didn't you? It prompted me to start volunteering at Derby Refugee Centre – thank you'). For Scutts the event created impact by:

'tap[ping] into the conscience of the audience. This is most significantly through your own honesty and questioning of how someone processes and responds to events such as the refugee crisis and the Palestine situation. ... in *Acting Alone* where I really felt your struggle. So your work is not simply just informative but also compels the audience to question how they have responded to the subject and are going to respond to it.' (2016)

As I noted with AA, it could be argued that the performance of ASTT was to an **interested** and **already engaged** audience and that the impact of these productions was to strengthen, reinvigorate and focus the existing efficacy to greater effect. That the energies of this community audience would be further contributing to revolutionary actions to challenge the daily diatribe of anti-immigration rhetoric.

In conclusion, I have argued that the methodology of PaR powerfully facilitates the creation of human rights theatre for regional publics. That these two case studies have created efficacy through the use of verbatim, testimony and participation to create a powerful theatricality engaging spect-actors in revolutionary action.

Creating new participatory models of engagement that help to foster global citizenship using Boalian theory offers starting platforms for spect-actorship as this area of practice expands and using shared platforms with agencies such as Amnesty for radical participatory performance in local communities, it offers individuals the opportunity for collective action, empowerment through democratised discourse to create a revolutionary performative, for an international stage.

The challenge for myself as a theatre maker will be to explore the potency of the wider community who were not present in the theatre, who are not concerned with the human rights abuses. As Kershaw articulates 'where the silent majorities might find a newly resonant and engaged voice, then it may lead to a wider liberation of human kind's most precious resource' p86.

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Notes on Author

Ava Hunt is an artist with 35 years of applied theatre practice and senior academic at University of Derby lecturing in applied theatre. She is currently in receipt of a British Council International Artist's Development Fund researching a new piece of theatre for school audiences about young refugees as part of citizenship and PSHE studies.

Notes