

ACTING BRACKETS

(from notes on directing Leslie Scalapino's *Flow (Winged Crocodile) / The Trains*)

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In spring 2010 I directed my company The Relationship in Leslie Scalapino's *Flow* at Poet's House in Manhattan.

Directing work on the text of *Flow* involved an extended collaborative close reading with the three speaking performers. When Leslie had asked me in 2009 to direct the work for the Belladonna series, I had no reservations and though I know the complexity of her work, little forethought what a journey deep into its theatrical intricacies this would become. These notes do not give a textual reading of the play, but address our dramaturgy of a specific aspect of Leslie's writing of it. Though much debated and discussed, with struggles in the minutiae and illumination coming from all parties, not all of this close reading was explicitly verbal. While performers are insistent on knowing what a text is *saying*, the question of what a text is *doing* can be directly investigated by doing itself, in body and voice, in time and space and relation. And this text says much in its doing.

The text also happily deviated all easy character psychologies, as it interrogated and, as a play, thus embodied an interrogation of, personhood; and personhood inseparable from the world.

the two parts
of the brain
equal at once
 race
together always
 seemed
in conflict
or (oar) serene

(first lines of the text of Leslie Scalapino's *Flow*)

The oar alternates sides, and moves us forwards. It is both simultaneous and not with 'or'. In an American accent, the two words are homonyms; the actors had to think and know and thus communicate the oar that was unsayable. The two parts of the brain, too, though together always, are simultaneously serene and in conflict, and thus race, kinetic. We took this dialogic firing of two at once (two as one, one as two) as the motor and necessity, at once synchronic and diachronic, of the whole work. Each positing of a thought is delved into, laden and pricked with gloss and depth, and produces a new (and also simultaneous) opposite.

The lines are spoken by Tanya, who, as Leslie describes, is 'a young woman dressed to imitate the appearance of Patty Hearst in the photos of her in the bank heist with the SLA'. The other two speaking characters are the left and right sides of the brain. It is never specified that they are the left and right sides of Tanya's brain, but then she is only dressed as Tanya. She is both Tanya and not.

In *Stone Marmalade*¹, a play collaboration between Leslie Scalapino and Kevin Killian, (in which, the very different styles of the two writers grapple in muscular and productive co-existence) one of the characters says:

'I feel sorry for the actress who has to play me. In fact, I feel sorry for the actress who has to say these lines. Hello? Actress? How do you survive having to reach out to the world and make me come through your lips like vomit?'

Clearly the author (or one of them, or both) is speaking, but the actress has to say the lines; so the speaking of the lines does not constitute character in any figurative sense but an impossible hybrid in which the actress can not *be* the actress while saying them, yet nor is she playing another person. Is this the case with all writing for the mouths of others? In fact nor can the actress even *play* the actress while saying them (the other character in the scene is named Julia Roberts), the lines *themselves* speak in the first person, the lines are the character. Though from the point of view of a playwright, an important difference to most poetry, 'I' is not necessarily me.

Simultaneity is not only a relation in parallel, as of left and right. Like layers of skin and flesh, being(s) is (are) in one person in layers that however will not be fixed in priority of containment. Leslie's brief direction before the play says that

'The tone of the play is light comedy for a charge of combustion by the performers who are sprightly seeming to push on any balance accruing there (where they are in it) until it spills over (as if the performers are in reference to an imaginary line) vomiting outside by it being inside (as if inside and outside is in them, and in us, the viewers). Directions may say that an actor "says gorgeous puking." This is to be done by their enacting their words as if words are 'the gorgeous outside.' As such the actors are elegant, never shouting or gross.'

What is inside becomes externalised bodily in a repeated (pun intended, and at the same time repetition later becomes a trope that is to be 'broken through' from) act of voicing that is involuntary on the part of the visible speaker.

I was already working on ventriloquial techniques for another project with some of the same performers, and for *Flow* we practised an extensive range of exercises in which the spoken attested to a multiplicity of person, might surprise the speaker, might alter physicality. Language itself became an actor in the drama played out in the body of the actor. We played with techniques of lipsynching, of distributing the language over more than one speaker, and coming to images such as the performer Tanya's open soundlessly screaming mouth, as in the silent bank heist surveillance footage, seeming to let flow out the words voiced elsewhere.

We already watch more than one person when we watch an actor. Buber describes this flickering dual being: 'the union of meaning and being, and no-one comes near it who reflects upon it: only he comes near it who does it.'²

So Leslie Scalapino's *Flow* is in fact, despite the density and apparent difficulty of the work for performers, conceived in extreme theatricality. I think of Michael Fried's discussion of the word theatricality (indebted to Diderot), in which it is the opposite of notions of absorption in art, where the activity within the painting or play are necessarily contained, a hermetic elsewhere indicating a further elsewhere in the mind of the figure.³ This is the absorption of a Vermeer girl who reads, or of the movie character upon whom we project thought just as they themselves are projected. In these conventions, it is not desirable that the actor be vulgarly in the real moment. This is a different layering, on absence; Leslie's on the other hand is always and in detail and in multiple, present.

Between the two lips of Leslie's brackets emerges, not an aside (which is why I avoid the term parentheses) but the shimmering of an also-present.

If the brackets are the mouth, the quotation marks are ears. Leslie instructs:

'When one speaks a phrase in quotation marks, she is quoting someone else and herself at the same time.'

In the ears reverberates the chord of knowledge, through repetition, of the other state, the other time, the other person. The new speaker/time/state takes the words out of the mouth of that other, and makes tiny differences, refines forwards.

For some speeches we split the speaking across both sides of the brain. For example, in general, Leslie has laid out the speeches of the left brain on the left side of the page, and those of the right side on the right; Leslie clarifies that this is a matter of displaying simultaneity on the page but the left side is read first and then the right. Trusting, however, the embodied difference in speakers to maintain separate trains of thought, we alternated lines – a line from the left followed by one from the right, and so on. The cadences and physicalisations of suspended speech or thought allowed the listener to retain one building set of fragments while giving attention to the other.

Another of Leslie's typographies is the use of italics. These are not simply conventionally emphatic; it is often the small word, such as *the*, that is italicised. Her italics say that nothing must be lost. No word is used casually. Sometimes words are unitalicised, followed by an italicised form:

'the man
the man'

At first, same-but-different variations such as these were articulated by the speaker as an enacted and meaningful deliberation, but as the performance went on, others of the two other speakers might interject the variation, a grain of actual voice differentiating without interruption of the flow.

These variations in the play's typography and thus acting are essential, they are the difference between 'endless recurrence' in a pattern of pain and what 'breaks through'. This breaking through

in *Flow* is eventually different to the eruption of person in person, of language in language; it is to image, and specific, it is

'dream: I

step out...'

This emergence is to landscape and animal. Far from person and language,

“They won't hurt me

/won't trample me” is a thought said'

But also within the action itself of the play is a non-linguistic being, the 'crocodile-Michelin-rhino', who is pure kinetic daemonic motion (in this production the dancer Molissa Fenley). While the movement described above of the speaking characters through layers of person is to some extent invisible, in that it is not an obvious form of gesture or locomotion/displacement, the actor's job is to make it visible; as Steven Connor describes, one would be 'mistaken in seeing speech as emanating merely from the tongue; for speech is a production of the entire physical being.'⁴ The crocodile is not exempt from simultaneity; she is both the winged crocodile and the charging rhino, buoyancy and aggression. And while on stage at the same real time as the speakers, she is not in the same performance time: 'They do not ever see her... they don't create her as their imaginings, she is in a separate, simultaneous realm.'

The animal image is not romanticized; it also transfers to another persona the left and right brains speak of, the Barbie doll with horns. This seems to be both Patty Hearst in her Patty persona (the privileged highschooler as opposed to the revolutionary and /or brainwashed Tanya), for which we practised the debutante wave and smile, but it is also Sarah Palin – for she 'eats moose!' – the radically unfeminist. So while Leslie's feminist critique is apparent from the second speech on:

her hating women x-

cluding them from work

or recognition which she

determines to herself

and her few pets men.

it is far from a simple male-female gendered opposition; and while all the performers are female they still ventriloquise the 'man in black robes', who in turn appears internalised by Patty (& Palin) in their accepting or aggressive masculinist cultures, in other words they internalise both the dominant and the dominated.

Just after the first telling of the dream, the first (and shorter) Act ends. Till then the audience had been indoors. At that point the performers remained frozen in place while the glass door behind them rose revealing the landscaped plaza outside, and the audience were led to sit out there, facing the work from the other side. They literally crossed that line themselves, into the Second Act's expansion of the thematic of inside and outside from personal to public.

At one point in the action, after the almost possession of the speakers by the words they are ventriloquising, to the point of the voice convulsing its speaker, as mentioned above, we decided that the movement of their own lips would disappear, with their own voices on voiceover. And then they themselves disappear, image and voice alone inhabiting the space. This is a hidden disappearance for the left and right sides of the brain, and for Tanya a freezing into image, her voice spooling out tongueless. When they re-emerged, it was with all times, all speaking at once, the music playing, the dancer moving. This is a liberty with Leslie's linear order: dancer and music, *or* speakers. In the dramaturgy of things at once, we felt the need to make corporeal what was happening in the language, to create a temporal architecture so that the audience too must inhabit the simultaneity. It was not long. In a subsequent passage where the text opens further to speak of actual urban inside and outside, of the right to public space, the speakers were clear, separate, behind and above the listeners, who watched the dancer in a lyrical and measured passage below.

I want to be careful in these multiplicities and equivalencies, incorporations and channelings, that it not the case simply that anything might *easily* be, *or easily* speak through or for, anything else. The shifts and qualifications embedded in Leslie's paralinguistic writing, and thus to be embodied in paralinguistic performance, are minutely attentive and deliberate. It is this that is the main action (in the dramatic sense) of the work.

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Last night I heard Maggie O'Sullivan (among others) read poems by the late Anna Mendelsohn/Grace Lake. Maggie brought her powerful poet's drive to the other's long complex line, very different to her own arresting and knotted prosodies. In some ways, different to acting, it was neither woman who spoke, but the writing. Or all three.

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Flow (Winged Crocodile) / The Trains

By Leslie Scalapino. At Poet's House, New York, June 2010

Directed by Fiona Templeton. Performed by The Relationship. Co-sponsored by Belladonna and The Poetry Project.

Tanya: Julie Troost (understudy Asta Hansen)

Left side of the brain: Katie Brown

Right side of the brain: Stephanie Silver

Dance created and performed by Molissa Fenley

Music by Joan Jeanrenaud. Costumes by Jill St Coeur. Video edit John Jesurun. Drawings by Eve Biddle. Production Sohrab Mohebi.

Flow (Winged Crocodile) / The Trains is published by Chax Press, Tucson 2010. www.chax.org

¹ Kevin Killian and Leslie Scalapino, *Stone Marmalade*. (San Diego: Singing Horse Press, 1996).

² Martin Buber, 'On Polarity – Dialogue after the Theatre' in Friedman, ed. *Martin Buber and the Theatre*. (New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1969).

³ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁴ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck - A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. (Oxford: OUP, 2000).