

## *my hands as a common grave as a garden...*

By Luis C Sotelo

A text in response to *The Jesus Guy*, a theatrical performance written and directed by Julia Lee Barclay and performed by Bill Aitchison, Lukas Angelini, Zoe Bouras, Rachel Ellis, and Theron Schmidt witnessed by the author on 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2006 in Camden People's Theatre, London.

*The Jesus Guy* performance is an example of anti-aesthetic theatre. By anti-aesthetic I mean a type of art that openly challenges the still dominant assumption that art's highest ambition is to be beautiful.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, *The Jesus Guy's* ambition is rather to be authentic, real, simply alive. This characteristic turns it also into what could be termed a piece of postdramatic theatre because its theatricality does not reside on its rootedness in a dramatic text but rather on the fact that its series of actions happen within the frame of an event that was made to be watched, observed, briefly witnessed by others.<sup>2</sup> The source of its theatricality has thus to be searched in the power derived from the presence of an audience rather than in any text. For this reason, in this innovative type of theatre director Julia Lee Barclay creates, all elements that are present in the black box are made visible, including the audience. There are not veils dividing the audience from the performers as there are not closed doors separating the "real" from the "artistic" world. A window of the theatre was repeatedly opened and closed by the performers during the piece, establishing a dialogue between the indoors of the theatre and the outdoors of Hampstead Road in London, where there are constantly police or ambulance car sirens to be heard. That sound became an element of the art work: each time a car siren sounded the performers contracted their body as if the siren was a threat to them. As it is typical for Julia Barclay's shows (I refer in particular to the other piece directed by her I saw in London in 2005, *Heart Oven Falling: Gotcha!*, performed by Zoe Bouras and Theron Schmidt at Chelsea Theatre) the lights do not separate the audience from the performance space, which signals that the entire space is alive. This is an important element of Barclay's dramaturgy. Indeed, it signals to the audience that they too have to be active. Their role can be compared with the role of the buyers in an auction who have to be alert to not miss the chance of buying what they really want, something yet unknown to them but that can show up at any time. For some moments the spectator may feel lost, confused or uninterested. But for those who keep alert there is a sure reward at the end of the night.

All was open to be seen: the technicians operating the lights and video camera and visual artist, Birthe Jorgensen taking pictures as documentation (or part?) of the piece, the wardrobe that provided the performers with the different pieces

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<sup>1</sup> For an account on anti-aesthetics in the history of art see Mattick, Paul Jr. *Aesthetics and anti-aesthetics in the visual arts*. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Philadelphia: Spring 1993. Vol.51, Iss. 2; p. 253

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the term see Lehmann, Hans-Thies (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Juers-Munby. London: Routledge.

of clothing they used during the show (here the word costume is redundant) and a room adjacent to the main stage. The only door that was closed was the entrance door to the theatre. But even that door was opened by the performers at the end of the show as they started to leave the theatre. That act of leaving the theatre and returning to outside life as the final part of the piece was consistent with the entire anti-aesthetic aesthetic of this performance. Things and actions were not meant to be beautiful or artistic. They tried to be as authentic, as real as possible, which is undoubtedly one of the most difficult things to achieve as a performer. This anti-aesthetic theatre reminds me of the Dada anti-aesthetic creations and protest activities at the beginning of the twentieth century that wanted to challenge the bourgeoisie and their values. Certainly, this performance challenges main stream values about art and performance and re-introduces play, ritual and performance as categories of spontaneous, unpretentious every day life. This is undoubtedly a daring thing to do in a context like London where musicals, narrative theatre and in general analytical ways of thinking are so dominant. What is asked from the spectator in this piece is poetic, associative, extremely personal thinking. A type of thinking that departs from what is given to her to be seen and heard. The anxiety of not "getting the said message" might impede people from enjoying this show. Words are treated here as materials. They do mean something but their meaning is immanent to the action rather than to a linear narrative.

*The Jesus Guy* is an example of postdramatic theatre because it does not have defined characters such as the soldier, the citizen, the politician, the son, the mother, etc. They don't even have names. They are just human consciousness in action. The show lasts approximately an hour and a half and has many moments that could be remembered in this writing. I will focus on one particular moment that, for me, goes to the core of what thematically *The Jesus Guy* attempted to convey. For this to be told, more than in other reviews, the first person voice is crucial, one that is so personal that it is by its own right already poetic. I can only render testimony of what I witnessed mixed with the associations and issues that it evoked to me. Any other spectator would paint you a completely different picture of what her experience was like. This is one of the main virtues of this type of art: it leaves you with what you can make out of it. One thing I want to say in public to Julia Lee Barclay and her team of co-workers: thank you! I really enjoyed the evening and it inspired me to write what follows:

I saw a young man taking care of another young man who was lying on the floor. More precisely, *Young Man One* was moving his hands slowly over the body of *Young Man Two* without touching him. There was no touch at all between them, no contact. And yet, the entire scene was about contact; about the presence of contact. It looked clearly like an act of healing; the hands of *Young Man One* were supposedly sending energy or heat to the body of the laying man, *Young Man Two*. *Young Man One* was concentrated and willing to do something of benefit to *Young Man Two*. This became more obvious when at the end of the action *Young Man Two* promptly lifted his upper body until he was sitting on the floor and with the most serious determination turned his body to one side and looked for his black wallet on the back pocket of his trousers; he

quickly opened his wallet as if showing that he had no intention to let *Young Man One* leave without proper remuneration. In the deep and black emptiness of *Young Man Two's* wallet I witnessed that there was only a twenty pound bill left. Holding the opened wallet firmly with his left hand (in the similarly cautious way one presses a pita bread to fill it with tomato and other garnishes), *Young Man Two* searched inside and, as if he was happy for having found exactly what he had been looking for, he quickly grasped the bill, folded it a little with his fingers and handed it to *Young Man One*. This was a transaction that made me think "hmm, paying for love?!" Love without sex; love without kisses; love without gender; love not aligned with compassion; love in kind; love as a form of touch; love as a means of communication; hands as an oven put upon a cold heart; hot hands expecting nothing from the close breath of a laying man; hot and open fingers extended to reach a yellow ocean of distance; fingers without rings; ringless fingers not compromised by words... These two young men looked like animals not doing anything to each other and yet, crying aloud their interior silence upon the other body; voices in exchange witnessed by deaf audiences thanks to the body language put in motion on stage; singular armours dissolved into the flow of love... the heat of *Young Man One's* hands defeated the boredom of *Young Man Two*, put sensations in action, wrapped male humour in void and silence; *Young Man One's* hands managed to stimulate rock and roll in my head; that moment of paying off an *ex-gratia* with fair determination I had witnessed was a transaction of love; it was a payment, yes, one showing that even behind money there can be sincere communication if it is so intended.

*Young Man One* and *Young Man Two* had been playing earlier with soldiers; they had been playing war using plastic buckets, one each. They had put the buckets upside down as platforms for their soldiers to be grounded. Drumming their soldiers away the war game was over less than a minute after it had started: a Blitzkrieg, a Blitzkilling, a Blitztemper, a tempest of hallowing sounds coming out of the plastic emptiness of a bucket; of two buckets, actually, one of each part involved in the conflict. A Blitzkrieg that ended with a question uttered aloud by one of the two young men. I don't remember exactly what they said, something like who will be able to file the complain now...

The plastic soldiers that had just been drummed to death ended up some minutes later in my hands. Another young man, *Young Man Three* had collected them as if he was an entomologist gathering both exotic and standard butterflies. *Young Man Three* had organised the soldiers using four or five strings tied around one of the columns in the room in which the entire action was taking place. He had placed each soldier on the column by putting it in the tight space between the column and the different strings. Each soldier had its own place on the column and yet they were organised keeping a regular distance from each other – like an entomologist would have probably organised his private collection of rare insects. When I first saw that image there were an abstract, uncertain number of soldiers attached to the wall; thanks to the low yellow light of the few bulbs that were lighting the space the soldiers looked then like a group of cockroaches standing quiet and sleeping; that image reminded me of the Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner in central London that I had seen some days ago. The green/grey Australian granite with

which the memorial was built echoed in my mind the dark green colour of the plastic soldiers that were used in the war between *Young Man One* and *Young Man Two* and that were now exhibited on the column, as if they were standing there instead of a long list of an uncertain number of missing soldiers. Hundreds or thousands or simply a large bunch of names/plastic soldiers were attached to that column; so many indescribable names looking like insects sleeping on the wall: the presence of death turned that column into a sacred place. How many people have been killed in man's history on a column like this? How many executions have been performed in probably all cultures using how many methods from fire to water to lashes to gunshots? That column became in my eyes a ritual pole, one from which the living performers of *The Jesus Guy* talked to the dead; a pole from which insects observed humans killing other humans. Love is human as much as hate is.

The presence of a quest for humanity was there during *The Jesus Guy* I witnessed on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006 in London's Camden Peoples Theatre. That quest was there buzzing like a small mosquito, one not visible at first nor at second glance, but only when the ears are ready to hear and the eyes ready to see...an insect buzzing inside our hearts, asking for compassion, searching for a spare space; carrying oxygen for a dying pump, interrogating our most fixed, our most assured convictions/properties/ownerships, lifting strange folds from our life muscle, (ironing wrinkles off our life muscle)...insects with such fine wings that almost no sound was made during their lines of flight, during their journeys from the smiles of some people in the audience to the mourning silence of some other people there or elsewhere, insects pointing out at the string that links those who celebrate a killing with those who have the horrified mouth of a mourning mother; insects that were there on that column waiting for the life of the body to fade away and so to have their most wanted party, a dinner for selected guests...

As I said before, at one point a bunch of those soldiers ended up in my hands. *Young Man Three*, the same entomologist who had collected them when he cleaned the battlefield produced by *Young Man One and Two* had given them to me and I had accepted them, yes, the same chap who had designed and built the memorial made up of strings and plastic soldiers, that young and bald man had taken the soldiers from the wall and planted them in people's hands; my hands became a cemetery; my hands were suddenly a portion of planet earth, they were earth indeed and the soldiers were seeds that had been planted in my hands, the same body parts used by *Young Man One* to heal *Young Man Two* a couple of minutes (or had it been millennia?) ago; my hands as a common grave as a garden; there was heat in those soldiers in my hands; they were so cold that heat was activated in response. A young woman, *Young Woman One* passed dripping with water from her hands; drops like drops from wounded lungs; drops that sounded as silent as the insect's wings that were flying around in the space; drops as mirrors on which I could see light, the light of the bulbs lighting the room; drops as bright as pearls and as precious and rare as oil; a liquid that did not belong to *Young Woman One* but that had been found by her in a metallic basin, the same type of basin in which I had seen feet being washed; perhaps that water was the trace of washed feet; perhaps that water was a chemistry of tensions turned into an odourless and tasteless flow.

*Young Woman One* carried in her hands - the same body parts again - a dripping liquid. She was holding something that escaped any form of possession, like the insects that were buzzing around; drops of a liquid vision that was there looking at us looking; the vision of a light that had gone through death and was now between us, among us, in us; an unheard voice available again for those whose eyes were now ready to see and whose ears were ready to hear and experience love in its dynamic tension and motion.

There was another woman, *Young Woman Two* whose voice was so clear and firm and poignant. A voice asking questions: "perhaps we should not buy plastic at all", she said; "perhaps we should not pay taxes for soldiers"; a woman with long black hair, a mother? That woman had held a baby dress in her hands when the performance was starting and the audience was entering into the room. What happened to that baby, I wondered. She disappeared, she was missing at the end of the piece, and her presence had subtly been announced, no more than that, only announced.

### **Luis C Sotelo**

As a performance scholar and artist, Luis C Sotelo was trained at New York University; in New York he worked as a dramaturge and dancer and created his first solo piece, *Oxymoron*. Back in Colombia, his home country, he created between 2002 and 2004 a number of pieces of site-specific interactive performance art. In October 2004 he was granted a studentship from The University of Northampton, UK, to undertake a PhD research in Performance Studies. In 2004 he started to collaborate with French artist Chris. Dugrenier, with whom he has created and presented two major works: *Coventry Lit.*, presented in May 2005 during the Fierce Festival, and *The Shoemakers' Ball*, presented in June as part of Northampton Arts and Music Festival 2005. This year (2006), a second version of *The Shoemakers' Ball* is going to be presented again during the Northampton Arts and Music Festival in June. These projects were funded by Arts Council England and other local institutions.