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PRESENTING AN ABSENCE

being a reflection upon one aspect of a production of OUR COUNTRY's GOOD¹ by Timberlake Wertenbaker made by students in the department of drama and theatre studies at Chester College of Higher Education, December 2, 3 and 4 1993.

This was to be a first production experience for a group of year one undergraduates who had opted to follow a Production Work for Audiences module in their initial semester.

Trying to reconcile the students' needs with my own current interests as a mildly obsessive theatre maker proved difficult. This was a group new to one another, new to undergraduate life and in many cases, new to the production process. Despite, therefore, having laid elaborate plans for a devised piece based on Adam Phillips' ON KISSING, TICKLING and BEING BORED² (which encapsulated much of what theatre can be) I switched instead to an existing text - which on first reading was declared "*..impossibly masculinist.*

Can feel the women being squeezed out already.." because of its historical setting and the seemingly "*..irretrievably abject position of women*" in the play. Further work on the text, on historical background and into early prison-based productions shifted that initial response considerably.

OUR COUNTRY's GOOD struck me as directly 'useful' in pedagogical terms for raising questions about the nature of theatre itself. The relationships between text and performance echo the dominant thematics of colonisation and power and the potential for exploring different kinds of intertextuality was an added attraction.

Such a text would satisfy my need to fundamentally re-think processes³ whilst

providing the student company with appropriate practical and intellectual challenges. The theme and the metaphor of colonisation recurred throughout rehearsals, serving as a point of cohesion in a generally messy and divergent activity.

The theatre process for me starts with darkness; utter and absolute. Not a blank page nor an empty stage but a sense of solid blackness that is to be somehow cut up, penetrated and dispelled by the ideas and actions that arise from the struggles that go on between idea, text and space; between the acting bodies and the voices; between the company itself; between our worst and best, our highest and lowest feelings and judgements. (I am alarmed at my own leanings towards discourses of dis-memberment and dualism in attempting to document theatre processes, but these are the images that first spring to mind. It is a messy, webby process that absorbs all energies and strategies and tends in actuality not to organize into neat oppositional segments.)

The particular problem that this paper will focus on arose because it chimed with other questions that preoccupied me at that time - about blackness and whiteness, presence and absence.

This process began with sound - and with images for the final exit.

Timberlake Wertenbaker's last stage direction in *OUR COUNTRY's GOOD* reads thus:

"And to the triumphant music of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the sound of applause and laughter from the First Fleet audience, the first Australian performance of The Recruiting Officer begins" (p.91)

The whole 'triumphal' thrust may well be played to carry a weighty irony, but my

impulse was to have it challenged, muddied and questioned by the single most problematic (for me) figure in the text - that lone aborigine. From the start, I wanted the audience to leave the play not with words, not with Beethoven even, but with darkness, and with the odd and awesome resonance of didgeridoos battling against (perhaps drowning?) the symphony. I also wanted to find a way of giving that aboriginal figure if not the absolute last word, at least some 'say' in the final image. The desire to sustain the audience's complicité⁴ in reading the final moments of the action also proved a useful mechanism in attempting to pull together an inevitably fragmented and uneven rehearsal process. Timberlake Wertenbaker uses the Restoration text and Keneally's novel to magnify notions of class and socially constructed self through several layers of historicity in her play. We wished in no way to deny the ironic placing of this narrative of how the home-grown 'savage' criminal classes were civilised by contact with Farqhar's cynical comedy of economics against the consequent obliteration of the existing culture. The majority of rehearsal time had to be spent on working through the complexities of that Tempest-like tale.⁵ But the aboriginal figure demanded that his difference be noted not ignored.

There was a sense, too, of trying to right a "wrong" I felt I had committed in a previous production of Caryl Churchill's and David Lan's 1986 text of

A MOUTHFUL of BIRDS⁶.

I did not know how to represent black characters without black performers, so had de-racinated/white-washed the text by severe editing of the Baron Sunday scenes,

removing all reference to voodoo and having Marcia played as a homesick Irish woman. This doubly removed any black woman's voice, any iota of a black presence from the text and the performance APART from the male half of Dionysius, who was also cast as Paul. By so doing, the notion of male blackness as dangerously exotic and potent was reinforced. The complete erasure of black women from a piece which aimed to capture the 'universality' of notions of possession was an unintended consequence. Even my subsequent reading of Peggy Phelan's questioning of visibility politics in UNMARKED failed to remove the mark of a sense of error by omission. (I seem sin-driven: theatre perhaps becomes the place where I can confess wrong-doing, and try again? Old habits and old thrills die hard - I always loved the masochism of the confessional.)

I had read about, but not seen, Leicester Haymarket's production of OUR COUNTRY's GOOD, in which the aborigine was represented by a figure completely coated in white dust,ashes perhaps, applied in accordance with some notions of actual Aboriginal body painting. It also stood to emphasise the eradication of these people, their becoming ghost-like figures in their own landscape. The idea of a very painted actor playing the role - of drawing attention to the difference through elaborate, decorative artifice on or around the body was tempting. However, since the actor playing the lone aborigine was also playing Black Caesar AND Captain Watkin Tench, we had to find a swifter way of marking out this particular role.

"Shirt off for aborigine, shirt on for Black Caesar," said the director in

desperation. This might have solved one aspect of the problem had the actor not been such a keen West Ham fan. His shoulders and torso were embellished in several places by highly visible Union Jack tattoos. They overrode any notions of directing an audience's gaze elsewhere; they were the only thing we wanted to look at on stage - and they did not say 'Aboriginal Australian'. They did, however, demonstrate a paradox about scale and visibility. They were tiny images, but utterly compelling in the way they drew attention to the actor's body as the bearer of symbols, at the same time as objectifying his presence as a body into nothing but "tattoo".⁷ The initial desire to make a strong presence out of the aboriginal figure remained, but I was intrigued by the peculiar 'removal' of the body the tattoo incident had demonstrated, and had vague stirrings towards trying to dilate aspects of the aborigine's role without drawing visual attention to the actor's actual body.

This figure has few lines in the text, and once work had begun on the opening it seemed important to give the aborigine the first word as well as the last soundscape. We ran scene one and two almost simultaneously, with the aborigine speaking from an elevated position⁸, his voice amplified through a microphone after 90 seconds of darkness and didgeridoo sounds. The first words of the Lone Aboriginal Australian, spoken over a still image of convicts crammed in the hold of a ship, were overlapped by the counting of the whiplashes by Ralph Clark. The spoken numbers were transformed into theatrical action by matching strokes of very thick, red greasepaint applied by another marine - a young woman

performer who doubled as Duckling wearing a naval uniform - onto the exposed back of the actor playing Sideway. This idea was provided by John Freeman, a colleague in the department. Meanwhile, a third 'marine' (another young woman who doubled as Liz) - cracked a whip against the rear wall of the performance space. These three separate actions signalled an attempt to overcome spectator expectations of realistic trickery or casting, neatly deconstructed the elements selected to represent this moment, foreshadowed Sideway's later involvement with the business of theatre, and reinforced the use of triangular spatial patterns which became a repeated motif throughout.⁹

At this point in the process I was aware of the male body standing for the body politic - this lone aborigine equalling the whole of 'virgin' Australia.¹⁰ By choosing to foreground and displace the aboriginal scenes from the order suggested in the printed text¹¹ and by amplification of the voice, we aimed to dilate the importance of the role and play those dilations paradoxically against the absence of a 'proper' placing on the stage. The aboriginal's marginalisation was literal - he stood alongside, but well above, the audience and his amplified voice emanated from beyond the main acting space. Visual amplification, making the aborigine's text literally 'bigger' by having it written into the set design had been part of my initial notes on the text. The imagery of ghosts and dreams that pervades his lines could then be seen to apply to the debate about the nature of the theatre process that dominates the texts of the other characters. Echoes from THE TEMPEST lurk in his words, too - but this aborigine is no Caliban, and

neither Ralph Clark nor Arthur Phillip are complete Prospero figures.

Eugenio Barba's notions of the dilated body in performance and Forced Entertainment's use of text made visible in EMANUELLE ENCHANTED were conscious influences in these decisions.

When spectators entered the space they were confronted with parts of the aborigine's text (here numbered 1 and 3) printed by hand onto long banners, framing a huge representation of an aboriginal sand painting of desert creatures on stage-right side of the performance triangle. The section (here numbered 2) was suspended longways above the representational map of Australia on the stage left side of the performance space.

1. The Aborigine Muses on the Nature of Dreams.

A giant canoe drifts onto the sea, clouds billowing from upright oars. This is a dream that has lost its way. Best to leave it alone.

2. Harry Brewer Sees the Dead.

Some dreams lose their way and wander over the earth, lost. But this is a dream no one wants. It has stayed. How can we befriend this crowded, hungry and disturbed dream ?

3. The Second Rehearsal.

Look: oozing pustules on my skin, heat on my forehead. Perhaps we have been wrong all this time and this is not a dream at all.

The final exit of the players onto the stage for the first performance of THE RECRUITING OFFICER was through the centre of the sand-painting - the colonising culture ripping through the indigenous one - leaving a space emptied and uninhabited, filled only with the conflicting musics and returning to darkness.

Kate Smith. January 1995.

¹Methuen 1988

²Faber & Faber 1993

³This need has its origins in work I encountered during the Summer of '93 examining devising processes with a range of practitioners brought together by the Cardiff Centre for Performance Research. I emerged feeling I knew nothing - not a 'bad' feeling - quite invigorating, in fact. But I felt pushed back to basics.

⁴"The group must have a shared approach to theatre to keep complicité between players and between players and audience." European Mime and Physical Theatre Workshop Symposium 12th - 18th September 1994. Reported in TOTAL THEATRE vol 6 no 4 winter 1994 p.5

⁵We decided with much reluctance and unease, that Meg Long and Black Caesar were the Calibans - the ineducable creatures in the convict group. The rest proved 'worthy of salvation' through art. Black Caesar had to be bullied onto the stage - an unwilling convert?

⁶Methuen 1986

⁷Those unfamiliar with the messiness of rehearsal processes may well imagine this moment of the "discovery" of the tatoos was a solemn and serious one: it was in fact a rapid and giggly affair, brought to conclusion by the researcher in the cast noting that tatoos were first introduced to European culture by contact with Polynesian peoples. The irony of its now being seen as a 'problem' in attempting to represent a pre-colonial figure on a 1990's stage was appreciated by all. The Union Jack found its way into the graphics for publicity for the show - occupying half of a map of Australia. The other half being occupied by an aboriginal figure.

⁸This raised platform, about 4 metres high, was originally intended to be matched by one for Captain Phillip which was to be suspended in space at the opposing end of a diagonal, allowing Phillip to physically dominate but from a precarious position that kept him very separate from any other character. The final design placed Phillip on a metre-high rostra surrounded by carved railings and seated in a rather ornate chair - a position he occupied throughout the performance - partly because the actor concerned had broken his leg, and finally because it made sense of the immense power Phillip yielded historically in the King's name.

⁹The performance took place in a large, rather clinical rectangular space, which I had decided to split along the diagonal and play into the apex of the resultant triangle for the

opening scene and the pre-execution scene in Act Two (2:6 'The Science of Hanging') with spectators seated along the base line of this configuration.

It proved awkward to work in, but seemed to somehow match the awkwardness of a text that drew on two other texts - Farquhar's 'The Recruiting Officer' and Thomas Keneally's novel 'The Playmaker'. It did, however, mean that the aborigine could view the proceedings from the spectator's perspective by speaking from the right hand corner of this base line. Triangulation also figured in the Union Jack (the flag of the First Fleet) which was, as previously noted, made visible as half of the map of Australia used on set to signify Captain Phillip's study.

¹⁰ The other half of this map carried a representation of an aboriginal figure: the body occupied the territory, but was in process of being displaced by the Union Jack.

¹¹ We moved 2:4 (The Aborigine Muses on the Nature of Dreams) to immediately follow 2:2. This reinforced the prescience of the aboriginal voice evident in 1:2, and allowed for stronger contrast in mood and tone by juxtaposing 2:3 (Harry Brewer sees the Dead) and 2:5 (The Second Rehearsal).

My thanks to all the students who took part and gave so generously of their energies in the making of this production.