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The Intimated Spectator: One to One encounters in BADco.'s *Memories Are Made of This...*

Antje Hildebrandt

In this article, I seek to contextualise the work of Croatian collaborative performance collective BADco., more specifically their performance *Memories Are Made of This...Performance Notes* (2006), on the basis of my witnessing of it at Chelsea Theatre (London) on 8 November 2008. I will discuss my very specific personal and subjective experience of the performance in relation to the very complex relationship between spectator and performer in general.

Within this framework, I will consider concepts such as intimacy and exposure as possible effects that can develop from this relationship. Writer and academic Rachel Zerihan states: 'to feel an intimate interaction with 'the performer' can heighten the intensity of audience reception' (2008: [my notes]). I will explore and expose some of the ethics, dynamics and possible problems that arise from an unusual performance situation and what happens when collective and singular spectatorship meet in one performance.

As part of the public performance of *Memories Are Made of This...* I was singled out to take part in a somewhat 'privileged' experience of two One to One encounters that were integrated into a ninety-minute formal theatre piece. I would like to clarify at this point that by 'One to One' I am referring to a performance situation that involves the presence of only one performer and one spectator, and that by 'formal theatre piece' I am pointing at a more 'traditional' or 'conventional' theatrical situation in which a group of people (the audience) watches a group of other people (the performers) do things.

BADco.'s performances generally steer away from the use of proscenium arch (the classical fourth wall). For this particular instance, the main auditorium of Chelsea Theatre was transformed into a horizontal performance space by placing five big tables for five audience members each to sit around into the

area normally reserved for the performers. On each table there was a dedicated performer, a radio and a photocopy of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* (on which the performance is loosely based). The spatial non-separation of spectators and performers suggested a proximate relationship and possible interaction between the two, for any safety distance seemed abandoned.

Memories Are Made of This... started in an unusual way. Sitting in the foyer/café area reading the programme notes and waiting to be called into the auditorium, I missed the beginning of the show when I suddenly realised that the five members of the performance collective had 'invaded' the space. No three-minute call, no reminder to turn off the phone, no artificial darkness, no anonymity. In the short 'introduction' that followed we were invited to join the performers in the two gallery spaces as they explained that they wanted to expand the walls to make a bigger space and put fake grass on the floor so that we 'could all sit down and have a picnic'.

I must have looked pleasantly intrigued because one of the performers came up to me and asked if I was available for an interview. Slightly perplexed I agreed and he led me upstairs into the theatre space on my own. The space was prepared for the performance and two technicians were making last minute adjustments (or so I thought; maybe they were not technicians but performers and they were performing). We sat down at a table and he asked me several questions: to describe a place in as much detail as possible, what I would do with this (the theatre) space if I could change it; he asked me to define boredom and to remember a situation when I was bored and describe what I would do in this situation. Lastly, he asked me how I would feel if I walked into a completely empty space. He recorded all of my answers on an MP3 player and, as the rest of the audience began to enter the space, he told me that we would have to finish now.

Once everyone was seated the performance properly began, but all I can remember now, four and a half years later, are whispers, fragments of (improvised) dancing, incidental music playing from the radio, text being

spoken, noise on the screens and, towards the end, dancing and simultaneous speaking in a language that I did not know (Croatian?). What I do remember is that about ten minutes into the performance the same performer who had interviewed me in the beginning repeated my answers in front of the rest of the audience whilst having a dialogue with another performer, using the MP3 player and headphones.

The second One to One encounter I experienced happened some time later, approximately halfway through the performance, when the same performer who had approached me the first time asked me: 'Can I show you something?' and led me backstage and then 'onstage' again. Sitting next to each other on a small podium, which was sectioned off from the stage with only two curtains separating us from the rest of the audience, he asked me to listen to sounds and text from his headphones and showed me a small 'hand-dance' performed on top of his knees.

It seems necessary before I begin with my reading of the performance to outline the context for my analysis and to explain how I approach the relationship between performer and spectator. German curator Florian Malzacher argues that:

The contemporary audience [...] is asked to relate texts and images to themselves, to make connections between often disparate elements, to supplement what they've seen and heard on stage in order to make their own stories. Thus activated and empowered, the spectator has a peculiar responsibility for what he sees. (2004, p.123)

As an emancipated contemporary theatre piece, BADco.'s *Memories Are Made of This...* is an effective illustration of French philosopher Jacques Rancière's idea of 'The Emancipated Spectator' (2007). As writer and choreographer Nicola Conibere explains: 'Rancière depicts an audience of individuals, each of whom creates her own unique experience of a performance by viewing it and translating it according to her personal experiences' (2008, p.9). In Rancière's own words: 'she participates in the performance if she is able to tell her own story about the story which is in front of her' (2007, p.277). His concept departs from traditional theatrical theory, for example Brecht's 'Epic Theatre', where the spectator has to be distanced

from the performance through the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) to become aware of his social situation, and Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' where the spectator has to be drawn directly into the performance.

One can relate this idea of an emancipated spectator to French curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), in which he describes form in contemporary artistic practice in terms of relations or encounters between people and/or things. His statement 'Art is a state of encounter' (p.8) suggests that this approach is not only used in theatre and performance practice, with its main concern in people rather than materials, but also in a set of artistic practices that Bourriaud calls 'Relational Art' and which he defines as 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context' (1998: p.113). He proposes that hereby the 'other' (or spectator) is presupposed in the art-making process.

Extrapolating this idea to the performance situation, the performer is informed about herself through her interactions with the spectator and vice-versa. It could be argued then that BADco.'s *Memories Are Made of This...* is intrinsically 'formal' in Bourriaud's sense of the word, as it is founded on encounters between people even if it is rejecting 'traditional' or 'conventional' modes of spectatorship. The act of placing audience members around a communal table, for example, suggests a relational face-to-face, rather than a frontal side-by-side relationship between performers and spectators.

Memories Are Made of This... specifically, but also BADco.'s whole body of work represents an approach to performance-making that understands theatre as an exchange between spectator and performer with the performer presenting something that depends on the participation of the audience in order to function as an exchange. This allows both spectator and performer to become recognised as unique individuals in the situation. This exchange was made explicit on several levels in the two One to One encounters I experienced in *Memories are Made of This...* .

Firstly, without my participation the performer would not have been able to present *his* material, which indeed was *my* material in the first place. Furthermore, one can see a second exchange in the relationship between the first and the second One to One encounter. In the first situation, I gave him something of myself when I revealed details about my bedroom (one of the most intimate spaces, one could argue) and other private secrets to him (for example, what I do in situations of boredom); in the second situation he gave me something of himself in return, a kind of 'thank you', a gift or token, even if it 'just' meant sharing a few minutes together looking at his hands and knees. The difference is that I did not dare lying to him when answering the questions (I suppose I may have lied had the questions been more personal) but he, on the other hand, was clearly 'performing' for me.

The feeling of exposure and betrayal, when he repeated my answers, given to him in a private moment, to the whole audience, was later met with a feeling of being 'special', as if I was the only one experiencing the intimate and unique moment of the 'hand-dance'. Again, it seems important to mention that the contract between performer and spectator is a socially and culturally constructed one in which one would not expect to hear one's own answers, given in privacy, repeated to a large group of people. By breaking this contract BADco. are questioning the realities of the social codes and behaviours that not only exist inside the theatre but also outside of it.

There is an implication that we are always engaged in ethical relationships with others, whether we find ourselves in social or theatrical realities. One could, or perhaps should ask, how much are performers responsible for their audience? One could argue that the manipulation perhaps hinders or limits an audience in their reading of the performance. However, what remains in my memory of the performance is a feeling of privilege and, at the same time, isolation. As far as I know I was the only one experiencing the performance in this way. Why did he choose me? Did I appear particularly open, friendly or interested? Did I just happen to stand in his proximity? Was it a coincidence? Was it a choice? I will never know.

The idea of incorporating One to One performance into a formal theatre setting is an interesting one, yet one that requires special consideration for some of the facts surrounding theatrical spectatorship. Theatre scholar Alan Read writes in his book *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance*:

The entry into the political and ethical through the power of three is the privilege of theatre. There is, in the act of theatre, the performer, the audience and you, and it is this tripartite, dialectical nature that demands distinct responses from the ensuing event. That event is quite different when undertaken between a performer and 'you' alone, entering the religious, the ritual and the therapeutic. (Read 1993, p.94)

I agree with Read's argument, as I believe it is a very different experience of spectatorship if one is implicated in a One to One performance situation, than when watching an event together with other people. As Belgium researcher Frank Coppieters establishes when examining audience perception, 'one's attitude toward/perception/of/relationship with the rest of the public is an important factor in one's theatrical experience' (cited in Bennett 1997, p.91). I would however add to Read's interpretation that this encounter would not only enter what he calls the religious, ritual and therapeutic but also the confessional, which is made explicit through my interview at the beginning of the piece.

When analysing *Memories Are Made of This...* it becomes clear that what is at stake are different ideas around space and place in relation to notions of privacy, intimacy, public, exposure and distance. More specifically, BADco. question what role space and place play in One to One encounters within a collective performance set-up. They explore and expose boundaries between public sphere and private space, as I will try to illustrate via three examples.

Firstly, most of the questions in the interview were concerned with notions of space or place. Secondly, when the performer led me backstage it was clear to me that we were entering a different, perhaps more intimate, space in comparison to the 'space for the public', the auditorium. For this occasion the 'conventional' expectations of 'formal' auditorium were 'displaced' as he led me to a place behind the scene. Thirdly, when we were sitting 'onstage', separated from the rest of the audience only by two curtains, it felt as if I was

experiencing a completely different, more private, world to the fast-moving 'onstage' world behind the curtains. I keep wondering, can we be very close to someone yet distant? Perhaps it is not necessarily spatial closeness that creates intimacy, but a greater awareness of the shared understanding of communality, of time spend together with one another.

After having had such an intimate moment with 'my' performer, on two separate occasions, I then had to share him with the rest of the audience for the duration of the performance: I remember sensing a strange feeling of jealousy, as usually only experienced with someone one loves. At the same time I was longing for a sense of identity within the group, a place to belong, as I was in a strange position of *in-betweenness*: part of the audience, yet also (and secretly) part of the performance. It is in this desire to belong that I experienced intimacy in *Memories Are Made of This*.... I shall now define the kind of intimacy that I mean.

Commonly, the word is used to describe a close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person. I would add that usually one has an intimate relationship either with members of one's own family, good friends and/or one's partner. However, the intimacy that I am describing is a different kind of intimacy; it is an intimacy that is created with a stranger in a particular context and at a specific moment – a One to One performance situation. This kind of intimacy is similar to the one that Lauren Berlant describes in her book *Intimacy*:

To intimate is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out a particular way. (2000, p.1)

I cannot say that my experience necessarily involved a desire for a shared narrative (or maybe it always already is), yet I became more aware of myself and the others through the ever shifting and changing relationship between myself, the performer and the audience, as it unfolded in space and time. Zerihan describes the One to One performance experience, historically speaking a relatively new concept in performance practice, very adequately:

One body to an-other. Spanning time, sharing space, marking place, blending breath, sensing touch. An emerging inter-face addresses both parties in this mise-en-scene of togetherness. The function and development of the encounter is reliant upon shared economies of exchange, identification and understanding. One to One performance foregrounds subjective personal narratives that define - and seek to redefine - who we are, what we believe and how we act and re-act. (2006, para.1)

This desire to find our own identity is something that might not only be specific to One to One performance but that can be found in theatre, and indeed life in general, as theatre scholar Nicholas Ridout suggests:

[T]here is something in the appearing that takes place in the theatre that seems capable of activating in an audience a feeling of our compromised, alienated participation in the political and economic relations that make us appear to be who we are. (2006, p.93-4)

Or to put it in writer and director Tim Etchell's words: 'to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's place in them' (cited in Malzacher 2004, p.125). American sociologist Erving Goffman sets out the parameters and pre-requisite for the experience of 'togetherness' that Zerihan describes above:

[W]hen two persons are together, at least some of their world will be made up out of the fact (and consideration for the fact) that an adaptive line of action attempted by one will be either insightfully facilitated by the other or insightfully countered, or both, and that such a line of action must always be pursued in this intelligently helpful and hindering world. (2005, p.83)

I remember clearly one particular moment in the second One to One encounter I experienced. In that moment something changed, the performance undid itself. The moment when theatre fails is a moment of embarrassment. This happened not because the performer said or did something embarrassing but because of a breakdown in communication. I did not understand his instruction and he, instead of repeating the instruction, decided to copy every single movement of mine until I followed my intuition and did what I thought I heard him say, which was to turn off the MP3 player. In this split second, which felt like ten minutes, both parties experienced a moment of uncertainty and awkwardness. How would we get out of this

situation? Ridout interprets this moment in *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*:

The theatre is all about appearing. It is an appearing in the face. In moments of embarrassment [...] what is happening is that you are suddenly aware of being made to appear, of the fact that you have your being through your appearance. (2006, p.93)

In other words, I became aware of the situation I was in: on my own, with a stranger, behind a curtain in a room full of people, unable to follow the 'line of action', feeling insecure, confused and uncomfortable because I did not know what was going to happen next. This vulnerability is part of the different kind of intimacy that I experienced in *Memories Are Made of This...*

The fear and the pleasure of singular spectatorship (One to One encounters) is the fear and pleasure of being singled out or feeling embarrassed in an intimate moment with a (unknown) person or being exposed in front of others. This situation becomes intensified for the person singled out when it is integrated into the notion of collective spectatorship, as 'the others' unknowingly bear witness to the event. There is always a sense that 'they' could perhaps become voyeurs in this situation, if they are not already, in case the intimated singular spectator is exposed as such. On the contrary, it might be true that, if the rest of the audience were unaware of my private encounters with the performer, I would be the 'insider', an advantaged co-conspirator: the knowing person who is keeping secrets from them. In retrospective, I could have been the voyeur, but in the moment of the performance I was so intensely engaged in negotiating my relation with the performer that I hardly realised the potential for observing 'the others' from my privileged position.

One point that remains important in my reading of the performance is that BADco. used different modes of engagement in terms of audience activation and participation. My memory of the performance is subjective, but also very specific, because I had a different experience to other people in the audience. This becomes particularly apparent in the moment when I heard my own

responses to the questions in the interview repeated in the context of the performance.

In conclusion, one could say that *Memories Are Made of This...* evokes tensions that fall into, or near, the categories of love and betrayal. Dance historian Ramsay Burt writes:

We say love is blind, because however intensely lovers look at one another neither really sees the other with much objectivity. The desire to be loved is the desire to be seen in great particularity, not just as anyone, or as another, or the other, or the Other; but as someone in particular who is quite unique and individual. (n.d., para.11)

I believe it is this recognition of individual uniqueness and particularity that Burt speaks of that I experienced in *Memories Are Made of This...* I might have been the only one in the audience with this unsettling, yet pleasant, feeling of (un)fulfilled desire. If I had been another spectator I might have felt threatened or bored, I might have avoided or even refused the invitation by BADco.

Yet, and even though my insider view contributes heavily to my experience of the piece, I might not have been so 'unique' as I initially thought, if we consider that in previous or future performances of the piece someone else occupied/will occupy my 'special' place. Since the intimate encounters were not improvised or spontaneous moments but part of a precise dramaturgy of the piece, I share my secret encounters with potential others whom I will never know, yet know that they exist. By reading the One to One encounters from this point of view I might have performed a sort of 'double exposure'. Not only had I naively exchanged confidences with a performer who 'used' my trusting intimacies for the benefit and enhancement of his show, but also have I no knowledge what happened to the recordings once the show was over. Perhaps my responses were, or will be, played back in subsequent performances, or documentation, without my knowing or being present.

Pushing this point further, I might have involuntarily contributed to the aftermath of the performance in an uncanny way, through a 'triple exposure'. Mine and others' experiences of witnessing may have been exploited by dully

providing free marketing for the company and promoting the show through word of mouth. After all, the more 'buzz' a company creates for themselves and their work, the more press, and ticket sales, the performance generates. Perhaps this can be said for all performance work since it thrives on legend and hearsay but through the potential for anecdotes (of the secret encounters) this particular performance exemplifies the complex structures of dissemination that exist for performances' aftermath: oral histories, rumours, mystification, and 'official' written accounts of the work like this article. What is left then for someone who does not experience the intimate One to One, for someone who came specifically for this reason? The fact that I can hardly remember anything about the performance apart from the private encounters perhaps tells us something about the power of personal address, not just in performance but also outside of the theatre.

Finally, the recognition that we are always both one and many, part and whole, part of a group and individual is a deeply ethical and political contemporary concern. What is playing out at the very heart of all such relations is the disturbing and perverse realisation that self-presentation, self-performance, self-exposure and self-exploitation are ubiquitous in a society that leaves no choice than to perform and participate. Yet, to live is always also to be exposed to the gaze of others. We take refuge in the thought that we might be able to suspend our self in the love of an other. We want to truly be seen and recognised by an other but can only desire and depend on each other. The paradox of eliciting painful pleasure: memories are made of this...

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