

**INTERVIEW WITH THE ACTORS IN WITNESS:
DAVID MOODY AND MARTIN MHANDO**

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After the re-presentation of a version of *Witness* in the Murdoch TV Studio as part of the Dialogics II Conference, (2010), and with a view to incorporating the reflections of their performance by the Director, Serge Tampalini and the actors, David Moody and Martin Mhando in this issue, I asked them a series of questions which they answered in a variety of ways. Serge Tampalini provided a meta-commentary of the research-as-praxis that informed ‘the making of’ *Witness*, and it is offered in full in Part 2 of this section. Part 1 is a blend of the actors’ responses to some of the questions I had regarding the interlinked processes that had resulted in their provocative postcolonial piece, *Witness*, first performed at The Blue Room Theatre, Perth 4-22 May 2010.

Jenny:

How did the script evolve?

David:

Witness was a collaborative work, which actually took only a month to write once we started. We met three times a week, and used the classic structure familiar to those who know the work of Caryl Churchill. We researched, improvised, and then both of us (Martin and I) would go away and *write* specific scenes or speeches. The research included reportage on torture and genocide (fun reading), including “Tomorrow You will be Taken Away and Killed with Your Children” and “Standard Operating Procedure”, both by Philip Gourevitch, “Country of My Skull” by Antje Kronje. We also used plays by Peter Weiss. We would then workshop the scenes, and Serge Tampalini, our director, would suggest changes and re-writing. I have been involved in many a process like this, and this one was the most harmonious and generous I have ever been involved in. I felt my work as a writer was really well understood and interpreted, and that Martin and I were really on the same proverbial wave length. It was exciting, and often inspiring. Also we laughed a lot, despite the terrible subject matter. No one was precious with their writing; we all were willing to edit and change.

I don't think any of us liked the whole show- there were probably bits that each of us were unsure about. I know Martin was unsure at first about the sample from LAUGHTER, which we used. I was unsure about the Gadaffi scene at first, and did not enjoy playing it. But it worked in the end, so I was wrong. But overall we really felt that each of us had "written" the show- that it was both a personal and a group project. I was very proud of the piece I had written- some of my best work; and I will keep saying that to anyone who will listen.

Martin:

The idea for the play was triggered by two readings below which we used to develop the theme:

At Tzaneen, a young Tswana interpreter is interviewed. The man holds on the table-top, his other hand moves relentlessly in his lap. "It is difficult to interpret victim hearings", he says, "because you use the first person all the time. 'I sit in front of the mortuary... on a low wall... I have to identify my child ... while I wait I see a liquid... slowly coming from under the door... down to a drain in the corner of the building... I see it is red... I just walk... I think they didn't find me for a long time...' I have no distance when say I... it runs through me with I... After the first three months of hearings, my wife and our baby left me because of my violent outbursts. The Truth Commission provided counseling and I was advised to stop. But I don't want to. This is my history, and I want to be part of it - until the end". (Lincoln, 2004,p. 34)

As Fanon concludes, "we are forever pursued by our actions? This is merely one of the snares that history (?) sets for us..." (253). Fanon's comments on the haunting of the future by the events of the past anticipates Caruth's observation that "[t]he traumatized? carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (5)

The opening scene is our re-interpretation of Stoppard's *Rozencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: an attempt to put a context to the near fatal "development axis" that positions the Blackman on the losing end all the time - even chance does not seem to alleviate that understandable fate.

A key aspect of the writing was in the consideration of the solitude of witnessing. As Paul Celan says, “No one bears witness for the witness”.¹ However the witnessing of a testimony can indeed allow for the creation of not just empathy but the production of secondary witnessing. For that reason the audiences of *Witness* were for us an essential consideration during the writing and the devising of the play since we wanted to make the audience not simply empathetic to the events but secondary witnesses who would be able to bear witness when their time comes. Indeed the performers as storytellers could only attest to the need for testimonies to be augmented by something else; that something is brought to the play by the audiences. The conceptualizing of the diverse types of audiences is something that the writing (devising) of the play also took into account.

One key aspect of the writing is the acknowledgement of texts outside our text.

As Serge Tampalini, the Director of the play put it in his Programme Notes:

“This play came out of a process of research and improvisation, and seeks to interrogate the nature of witnessing to historical and personal trauma. There is no single narrative except the terrible things humans do to other humans.... To the process of hunting and gathering texts we have added our own writing, based on the many and powerful stories we have read. We want to ask the following questions, at least: How do we forgive such horrific acts? Should we even try? Can mere words express, contain, or transform the depths of such suffering. ...What survives an act of inhumanity?”

Witnessing therefore becomes a reflection of the “crisis of truth” and here what we have is “the accident of witnessing”. There are several levels of witnessing that are utilized in the play. The performers both perform and witness. The Interpreter/Director is also a participant witness as he/she consciously or unconsciously enters the space of the witnessing and sees, hears of, participates in the events. Indeed the Interpreter/Director is there visibly necessary and necessarily invisible to give the witness meaning, to ensure that their testimony will be heard.

¹. http://www.goldenhandcuffsreview.com/past/intro_to_paul_celan.html On 6 April 1970 Paul Celan wrote in a letter to his friend Ilana Shmueli: "When I read my poems, they grant me, momentarily, the possibility to exist, to stand."

The witness talks to this interpreter because there is an empathetic understanding/relationship between them and indeed the interpreter cries and relives the pain of the witness.

The metaphor of the writer is an ambiguous one as the writers are also the performers in the play. The common writer writes alone, s/he hears this polyphony of voices around them that demand writing. S/he writes as witness to the voices around. But these are voices s/he invariably creates by simply sitting down to write. For the actors in this play they wrote and created the play from the desire to collaborate (Martin and David) through utilizing their memory of their individual reflections on the African tragedies of South Africa and Rwanda and carrying them over to other tragic spaces in the world where trauma and memory still survive.

Jenny:

Could you describe your creative process with the design, the sound, the lighting?

David:

The design was very much Serge's, with some ideas coming from all of us, which he just transformed with his usual genius. The shoes, which I felt made the set, were his idea. The ripped, dirty and torn clothes that were hung at the back came from an idea from Martin, based on what he had seen in Rwanda, and Serge again transformed the idea into a kind of installation a strange and disturbing beauty. The sound was a collaboration with Serge and our sound person, Seth Merlo, who had never done theatre before. Seth proved himself an artist here- what we loved was that he "got" the concept intellectually, and represented what we were after with real nuance and subtlety. The lights came late, but were also effective, especially in the use of shadow- this was a twilight world (with its own kind of real vampires).

Martin:

Methodologically *Witness* embedded a number of media components in its form, from film to song and music, reflecting the multi-disciplinary character of the writers, performers and production team. With Martin's cinema theory and production experience, David's theatre writing and acting forte and Serge's design and directorial focus the result was a creative template.

Witness is a devised play. Using different patterns of beginning, middle and end in a variety of exercises the actors develop improvised scenes leading to the fully-fledged performance. We began from the premise that physical action and expression combined with will and creative energy can result in a vibrant story with a beginning, middle and end. Then by simple addition of circumstance, changes of rhythm and character choices to the mix, the actors produce wonderful theatre. One of the most significant things in working with improvisations is the palette of emotional colours - many forms, many emotional colours. The saturated emotional content makes the movement incredibly expressive on the stage; the movement becomes the continuation and the embodiment of thought.

Jenny:

What would you say were the theoretical underpinnings to "Witness"?

Martin:

The play is a radical attempt to uncover the discourse of the psychological aspects of oppression and liberation as articulated by Frantz Fanon. Indeed *The Wretched of the Earth* is one of the central documents of the black liberation movement while also serving as a key text of theoretical interpretations synthesized to produce a functional theory of trauma. Fanon's writings influenced these two academics in no small measure. (Fanon, 1963)

The power of Fanon's writings lies in the recreation of the traumatic harshness of contemporary Africa and its capacity to draw out of this historical environment a reading of the history of trauma through generations.

Words as much as images reconnoissance the landscape of complicity and denial, recognition and estrangement, crime and punishment, memorialisation and recollection. (Mhando/Tomaselli, 2009:31)

The project aimed at investigating the role of theatre as a lived experience within discourses of trauma and memory. The idea was to develop -through improvisations and workshops- a play that reveals the painful interaction between a Whiteman and a Blackman - regarding reconciliation, but confronted with the difficulty of translating from a first person's traumatic memory.

It is difficult to interpret victim hearings because one uses the first person all the time. The two protagonists reveal deeply-lain social, racial and individual traumas.

The play interrogates the connection between trauma, memory and performance as lived experiences within theatrical, political, cultural and social environments. The Project interrogates models of witnessing and performance methodologies to examine how trauma is represented and the discourses that are revealed through the practice of witnessing and representation. The project actively questions processes of surrogacy in memory, acts of memorialization and processes of producing proxy witnessing.

The production draws upon the tropes of the horror film genre thus advancing an argument based on that genre's possible comfort within theatre just as much as it is at home in the cinema. The use of lighting, multiple media and audience participation works towards elucidating on the protector-protected paradigm in horror genre reception.

David:

There is a line in the play: "Someone has to bear witness". I just found a poem by Margaret Atwood where she says it better. We were exploring the act of witnessing these kinds of political and personal traumas, both as a political responsibility and as a kind of performance in itself. What does the process of witnessing do to the witnessing: witnessing is an emotional and a corporeal event and process; it leaves scars. Torture lives on, beyond the immediate moment. We were also interested in the politics of story- who owns the story once it is witnessed? The act of telling itself brings some power- the power of voice- to the victim; but something is lost to- there is a loss of ownership, a loss of power too.

Even in our acting these "real" stories, we were changing them, claiming them: by what right? Was the pleasure we received in ACTING them (the emotional catharsis, the simple visceral joy of ACTING) slightly pornographic? An act of appropriation?

I was also interested in the trauma of performing trauma: and found in fact, that it was very enjoyable. I liked torturing Martin, and despite the fact I knew it was make-believe, I found the thrill I got in acting "in power" over him educative and disturbing.

Jenny:

What was The Blue Room like as a space for these performances?

David:

Very intimate - I think the audience found the intensity quite confronting. As actors, it was also confronting at times. As an actor, I had to actually be “up close and personal”, in the midst of the audience quite a few times. I found it difficult, but also rewarding, because I could actually speak TO the audience, work the crowd, personally engage with them.

Jenny:

In adapting the play for the re-presentation how did you find the TV Studio as a space for performance?

David:

Very similar actually, without the same atmosphere of full set and lighting. The increased visibility of the audience made it even more of a kind of Brechtian performance- we really played TO the audience. I was really pleased to have some of my favourite students in the front row, for example, and very conscious of them in the performance. It made it quite a personal gift as a performance.

Jenny:

How was *Witness* received by Perth audiences and what were the critical responses to your production?

David:

The audience response was ALMOST uniformly positive- we received some very warm and personal responses. Interestingly, there was some really emotional responses from audience members who came from nations- especially in Africa- which had a real history of torture and human rights abuse. Indigenous audience members were also especially receptive. There were audience members in tears every night, especially in the Rwanda series, which was, we thought, the real emotional centre of the show. It nearly always moved us as actors too.

Critical responses were very positive too, except for one. Of course, we felt that the negative reviewer did not understand it. We felt that she was looking for a more traditional, linear and character driven work. She thought it lacked structure and was too academic. But we would disagree, wouldn't we? I think some audience members had difficulty with certain sections. One audience member hated the final comic turn, felt it was too glib and trivialized the whole show. Another felt the final discussion as actors was unnecessary. But most found it a moving, if not enjoyable experience.

Jenny:

Could you comment on your experience (which was unique, in my view) of working together as intellectual and then acting/performance colleagues.

David:

I can only say it was one of the best artistic experiences of my life. I had reservations- Serge had I are very different kinds of directors, even if we respect each others' work enormous. And our friendship has been both close and tempestuous. He has never directed me as an actor before, and I know he is a brilliant and demanding director. I am also physically handicapped to some extent. Serge was wonderful as a director and as a colleague. Martin and I had instant chemistry as actors; we are both flamboyant, improvisational and somewhat (I speak really of myself) natural "hams"- that was great, because there was never any shortage of energy coming back from our fellow actor. Martin and Lesley were both brave emotionally and physically- they took risks on stage and in rehearsal. I felt sorry for Lesley putting up with us stage hogs, but she held more than her own. The wonderful thing was the rigour of the intellectual work; the professionalism of the rehearsal and stage craft; and the supportive nature of the environment, largely thanks to Serge and our amazing stage manager Pip, and Lesley, our producer. We cannot wait for our next project: Martin and I have been talking... .

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