

Transforming Fear and Mediocrity into Awe and Wonder

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ABSTRACT

"To dream to life shared moments in space and time where fear and mediocrity are transformed into awe and wonder and where the inner and the outer become one".

As performers what do we really risk in those shared moments? And what is the nature of our failure when we turn our backs on the alchemic furnace of presence and weave with our intellect emperor's clothes?

On the final page of D.M. Thomas' 'White Hotel' the heroine smells the sap of a pine tree and in that instant transcends and surveys the journey of her tortured soul. Her senses are a gateway to a memory that is located in an intensely specific and detailed recollection and a gateway to a sense of the absolute subjectivity of reality.

Performance in such gateways is a process of witnessing with compassion. The overriding feeling for most of the audience at the beginning is one of immense fear. By the end, to a degree that cannot be accounted for by chance, it is love: a love that cannot be articulated or apportioned. Yet as a performer I feel only failure, not to have shared the moment indefinitely

CONTEXT

I'd like to start with an admission...I don't know what I'm talking about.

Perhaps I ought to put that in another way. I want, in this paper, to turn my attention to an area in which I have no knowledge. That's because knowledge, in the intellectual sense, cannot function within it, indeed, excludes any possibility of my entering it.

Since I am proposing the suspension of my critical faculties I should make my second admission at about this point...

I will fail

Either I will stop talking and there will be silence (no paper) or I will continue to talk and skirt around this big gaping hole of unknowing I am trying to fall into with words.

However, I am discontent with anything less than this pursuit so please forgive me if I stumble on.

Poetry kind of stumbles towards it as it dances in the space between the word and the thing it describes....

The Moment

*All mention of the Moment
Scholars must do without.
River suspends its flowing
And rock cries out
Witness to what
Our two eyes have no sight for
And our ears hear not*

*Breeze among the breezes,
Sun from beyond the sun,
Truly our homeland's wonder
On earth is come
With inviolate power –
And we know by the Moment's coming
We are born for the Hour.*

Waldo Williams

The moment here is sacred. **This moment is sacred...**it has a gravity which, if we let it, would bring us to our senses and awaken us from this dream of separation. My contention in this paper is that Theatre and performance, as the purest expression of human reflexivity, is a gateway through which such awakenings can come about. Indeed, in the urgency of our ecological crisis, it is a function we must embrace wholeheartedly and develop to the point of the annihilation of theatre and performance and the flowering of a new phenomenology of encounter and an ecology of infinite renewal.

For so much of the time we are, as Aldus Huxley said... 'animals obsessed with words and notions.' My personal take on this is that we have brought on ourselves a plague of memes. Like bacteria in a Petri dish, sickened by the environment of our making our brains feed on fetid culture as a form of 'death denial' as Sartre put it...and as the ecological reality gets more desperate so do our memes, reducing our brains to hamster wheels for our egos.

I was at a conference last week which was addressed by Jonathan Porritt, Tony Blair's Sustainable Development advisor. He said that in 1996, China's annual Grain Production stood at 390 million tons. Last year it was down to 350 million. 40 Million tons doesn't seem that much of a reduction – but then it is equivalent to Canada's

annual grain yield. Last year was the first time in its history that China **imported** Grain – about 10 million...which will increase over the next five years to 50 million. As a kind of sobriquet he told us that Climatologists estimate that a 1 degree rise in global temperature is equivalent to between 5 and 10 percent decreases in grain yield. This is the Prime Ministers advisor saying, and I'm reading between the lines here... we're fucking fucked.

Whether this is true or not we've grown up with this apocalyptic diagnosis haven't we?...to which we're kind of inured. So I suppose I am conditioned to be urgently discontent and see discontentment as the source of creativity. Barkers 'catastrophic theatre' which insists on the limits of tolerance as its territory [and] inhabits the area of maximum risk...' is therefore the natural domain for anyone who cares for the world. For me, that risk means being intimate with annihilation, letting the gravity of the present pull me into it and others with me. I build Labyrinths as stages in which to do this and here's one I'm building right now for North Wales Stage.

It's a mile long path through dark forest. Currently there are three artists in residence a poet and storyteller working on instillations within the Labyrinth and there will be Sensory Labyrinth Theatre performances throughout July.

About a month ago I and 7 other performers from Wales, Denmark, Bulgaria and Serbia created an impromptu performance for drama students here on an exchange. I'd like to show you a video of some of their feedback.

VIDEO

"I now begin a new life." It is a refrain among many others of similar profundity which I am hearing from all ages in response to the Sensory Labyrinth Theatre performances. I could probably lay out for you a psychological explanation for these responses which would include a thorough investigation of deep reflexivity induced by sensory displacement and simulated synesthesia and a host of other scholarly or pseudo-scholarly projections. I could create some cultish, new age, rights of passage ritualism performance meme to keep that wheel turning. But there is something here; I can feel it, which is beyond conceptualism: which is meme repellent. An Anti-Meme.

Nevertheless, I shall continue to dance around the fundamental fact that I don't know the first thing...not the first thing about who I am or what I'm doing here. And explain why I think performance has the ability to act as a gateway to renewal. I'll do so by way of an epiphany of sorts...

FIRST EPIPHANY

It was the early 1990's. The project brief was to promote a learning credit scheme for 14-16 year olds in Schools in rural North Wales. Initially, it did not sit well with our concept of Forum Theatre. At the end of the performances each of the young audience were given flash new filofaxes in which to write their learning outcomes. To us these small black books, career company brand emblazoned on their covers, were symbols of the 80's greed and capitalism. They even had mocked up credit cards inside which would offer discounts to those who signed up to the scheme for all kinds of youth orientated merchandise.

However the money was good, not good enough to hire more than three actors and a director, and we thought we could create something to help young people recognize that they had a right to choose their career, to find what they wanted to do in life, without undue external pressure.

Together, we created three scenes. In the first, a 14 year old girl working as a waitress in her weekends is oppressed by her boss and is unsupported by her long suffering colleague. In the second the girl comes home to her single mother who subtly exerts her desperate need for her daughter to stay in school and succeed academically. Something the young girl feels is not where her strength lies. (The scheme the project was promoting was for 'mid to low achievers' who were likely to leave school at 16, and was offering them more 'vocational' qualification routes).

Into this tense living room scene stumbles her uncle, visiting and slightly drunk from another failed job interview. In his early thirties, unemployed for 10 of those, bitter, pessimistic and apathetic. This pseudo patriarch's advice to his niece is not to bother studying or have ambition or aspiration because that way lies disappointment. The best strategy is to accept unemployment as a way of life because there are no jobs for the likes of us.

The final scene showed a career interview in the school with an inept and unsympathetic advisor and a mother who won't let her get a word in.

I was in the strange position on tour of acting the three main oppressors – the boss, the uncle and the Career Advisor and Joking the forum. It was a case of oppress, oppress stop come up oppress oppress how did she do ok stop oppress oppress etc. It became a kind of rhythm, which the audience seemed to accept, of me stepping in and out of character and those intervening subject to nasty oppressor alternating with supportive Joker.

We performed to audiences of school students who had not experienced Forum Theatre before, who had probably not been asked for their opinion before. So it was here, performing twice a day for four weeks, that I came to know intimately that wonderful reaction when you explain that 'we are going to perform the play again and this time you, any of you sitting there, watching, can shout stop, come up and take the place of the protagonist and try and change the story, resist the oppression, liberate our hero'. At that instant, although I have already explained this procedure at the beginning,

they hear it and they are changed. Not yet quite believing what I have told them their jaws drop, they look at each other anew and laugh with the nervous excitement of a baby discovering its first tool. This tool is the knowledge that they have the power to change things, something their education had forgotten to teach them.

One day we visited a special school. In the strange logic of Education Authorities this was a school which taught people with severe disabilities, learning difficulties and pupils with mental health problems. The school, though not unpleasant by any means, had that feeling of institutional apathy carried on the scent of disinfectant. They had forgotten of our arrival and there was a backstage scurry to pressgang classes into attending, while the suave head teacher presented to us an unflinching smile. We set up with the help of some of the boys whose education had, it seemed, been abandoned so they just 'hung out' in the school. One young man caught my eye. His hair was flame red his face so white that even the acne that covered it did not redden his complexion and one eye was swollen and bruised. I had the impression of someone who had weathered immense pain and suffering in their short life, and I suppose, looking in his aged eyes, my projection was not wrong.

The audience were brought in to the hall from all directions by listless attendants whose bodies spoke of wanting to be somewhere, anywhere, else. They formed a ramshackle audience: the front row of young men with mental health problems who it seemed were the only ones who were at all curious. Then behind them, spread out in a strange constellation, no chair or wheelchair facing the same direction, young people contorted into strange and strained shapes by cerebral palsy. It was not a still or silent image either. There were waves of convulsions, gasps for air and the occasional incoherent (to me) holler. Some had been placed by attendants in positions where it appeared they could not turn their head to watch.

What were we doing here? Most, if not all these young people would never have a career and here we were waving under their noses the challenge to make choices that they would never 'have' to take. To give them filofaxes and credit cards would feel like a cruel joke. The other actors were very unsure but I felt that if it was relevant to one of the audience it would be worth it and we persevered.

No one had a suggestion for the first scene so with ploughed on to the second. Now the Uncle was the one oppressor no one had a successful answer to. It was almost always a case of him being manhandled out with differing degrees of violence, which to the delight of the young people we accommodated with lavish action sequences in slow motion. But in the end, even if it was through the imaginary letterbox, he always won the argument because at that time in that place the economy was dire and there were no meaningful jobs. He was right about that. So how much more right was his apathetic stance for this audience. So when the young pale man I had noticed earlier said stop I explained the rule about violence and prepared myself for some stunt falls. He came up, gently held my upper arm and asked me to sit down with him on the sofa. We did so and he told me, with a compassion that I will never forget, to never give up. My character's hardened mask slipped...he became a human and at that moment so did I. I noticed that everything was still, I turned to the audience and saw there not one

disabled person. They were all intelligent compassionate beings, entirely conscious (knowing together) at that moment that I had been broken like them, but like them with an infinite strength that was made visible, tangible only when my hard exterior had been breached by kindness. And then it was gone.

I felt a veil of ignorance had been drawn aside to reveal a fundamental reality. Afterwards I asked the other actors whether they had seen what I saw. They conceded to feeling touched by the moment but not to having had some kind of miraculous shift in perception. Preparing to leave I was wracked with sadness, feeling that I was somehow abandoning these human beings to lay hidden behind this flimsy illusion of inferiority. Looking back, perhaps this was arrogant of me. By now I know the sky is always blue even behind the clouds: and there are still big black ones obscuring my view in most directions.

After ten years of Joking I still come back to this epiphany. It reminds me, though not enough I admit, that the aesthetic space created by TO can be a crucible for change that is not only driven by political or psychological insights or, dare I say it, agendas, but by the simple and sincere request to perceive a situation differently and a surrender to whatever serendipity in the form of the audience provides in answer to that request. That serendipity is not dependent on the Joker (it is often despite him/her) but impartiality helps and this is not to be confused with indifference. I care passionately about getting to the root of a problem...it is the phrase I most commonly and most sincerely use...'What is the root of the problem?' Sure, I usually know intellectually what it might be, but I never give up the hope that someone will shout stop come up and through their actions 'show' it to me, just as the young boy with the black eye did.

THEREFORE

...Performance is simply the concentration of attention towards a shared moment in space and time. At a point where a consilience of consciousness, literally 'knowing together' is brought about - space and time collapses into a singularity and perception is altered. Put in another way - attention is energy + will which in the medium of time and space is bent by the gravity of the moment. When the moment is of an intensity to warrant the complete attention of a group of people the threshold of that moment is breached and there is a breakthrough into an altered perception.

Theatre is a social contract to relinquish the will and let our attention be guided by performance into the aesthetic space which has the added dimension of memory and imagination. It has a capacity which is defined by the limits of our imagination. If that attention, which is without personal will, is directed inward onto the internal stage there is no limit because that space is defined by consciousness itself.

If I were to suddenly shift the attention which you are kindly giving me onto someone unprepared in the audience, I guess they would feel rather naked - caught in the glare of attention. However, when the convention is altered and when the attention is democratized, as in Forum Theatre, the audience is given its will back at the intermission, so to speak, and is invited to interact with the aesthetic space to change it. Immediately, attention encompasses their inner stage and outer stage – the psyche and the proscenium, and a dialogue between them about what is possible begins. This all encompassing attention, happening as it is with each audience member is limited by the aggregate imagination and memory of the audience – which for me makes it a far more interesting prospect than my own feeble mind.

Now, when theatre is democratized **and** anonymous, as it is in Sensory Labyrinth Theatre, then the inner and the outer stage do not dialogue, they become one. Let me give you another epiphany by way of example –

SECOND EPIPHANY

I am alone walking through a dark spiral. I know it well. I built it and inhabited it for months. There in the centre I waited for audience members to reach me, each one alone and in complete darkness as I am now. There I would take their hand and guide it to my chest. Placing their hand over my heart and reciting a simple series of lines in Welsh –

*Amser Maith yn ôl ac yma yn yr eiliad hon
Yng ngwacter y gofod ac yma yn y galon
Mae'r dirgelwch yn fyw*

A long, long time ago and here in this very moment
In the emptiness of space and here in the heart
The mystery is alive.

Lines repeated so many times that they engraved themselves in my soul so that their telling became only sound, the meaning of which vibrated through my body, through the audience member's hand, down their arm and into their hearts. When I felt that connection there was a shudder. I moved the hand and placed it on their hearts and waited to feel that unmistakable connection of energy again.

This begins the journey through a Sensory Labyrinth Theatre production in Fishguard in 2000. A winding path through an industrial unit festooned with black cloth making hundreds of meters of narrow tunnels. Pathways along which are a series of environments called sensory portals which are inhabited by performers. A beach, a washroom, a nursery, a living room, a garden, a womb amongst others. This is my first Labyrinth, since which I have created five with my colleague Mike Hotson. This is the last day of performances and I am the last audience member to enter. It also happens to be my birthday!

In the centre of the spiral awaiting me is my partner Louise. As a birthday surprise, I suppose, she is entirely naked and when she places my hand on her heart I naturally let my hand wonder across her body, which I know so well. Anyway, prudence dictates that the scene fades out at this point...Later, as I wonder through the Labyrinth I encounter not just the usual performers but a host of friends and relatives. For a long time I just don't understand why they are there. The sudden dawning that they are there for my birthday is a moment I will always cherish.

On discussing the finer points of the wonderful experience with Louise later we were in disagreement about a fundamental point. Who moved who's hand across her body? I was absolutely certain that I initiated the hand's course, while she was equally certain that it was she who guided my hand.

In the darkness and alone, where I end and you begin become blurred. That is a state of love, a love without object and the manifestation of attention directed by a will far greater than my own. It is an experience we discover that is common to many of the audience for our Sensory Labyrinth Theater productions. In my opinion such a phenomenon, that is not limited by intellect, imagination or memory, needs to be extended to encompass the world. If, to do so requires that the conceptual basis of theater and performance be annihilated, then so be it.

CONCLUSION

So, to sum up -

1. theatre is a shared moment in space and time that can bend the arrow of attention inwards to a perception of our total subjectivity
2. We have a responsibility to unfold rather than enfold and obscure this capacity with conceptualism.
3. The ecological crisis urgently necessities that we do so.

Thank you.