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THIS ISSUE:
Waves of change



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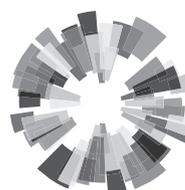
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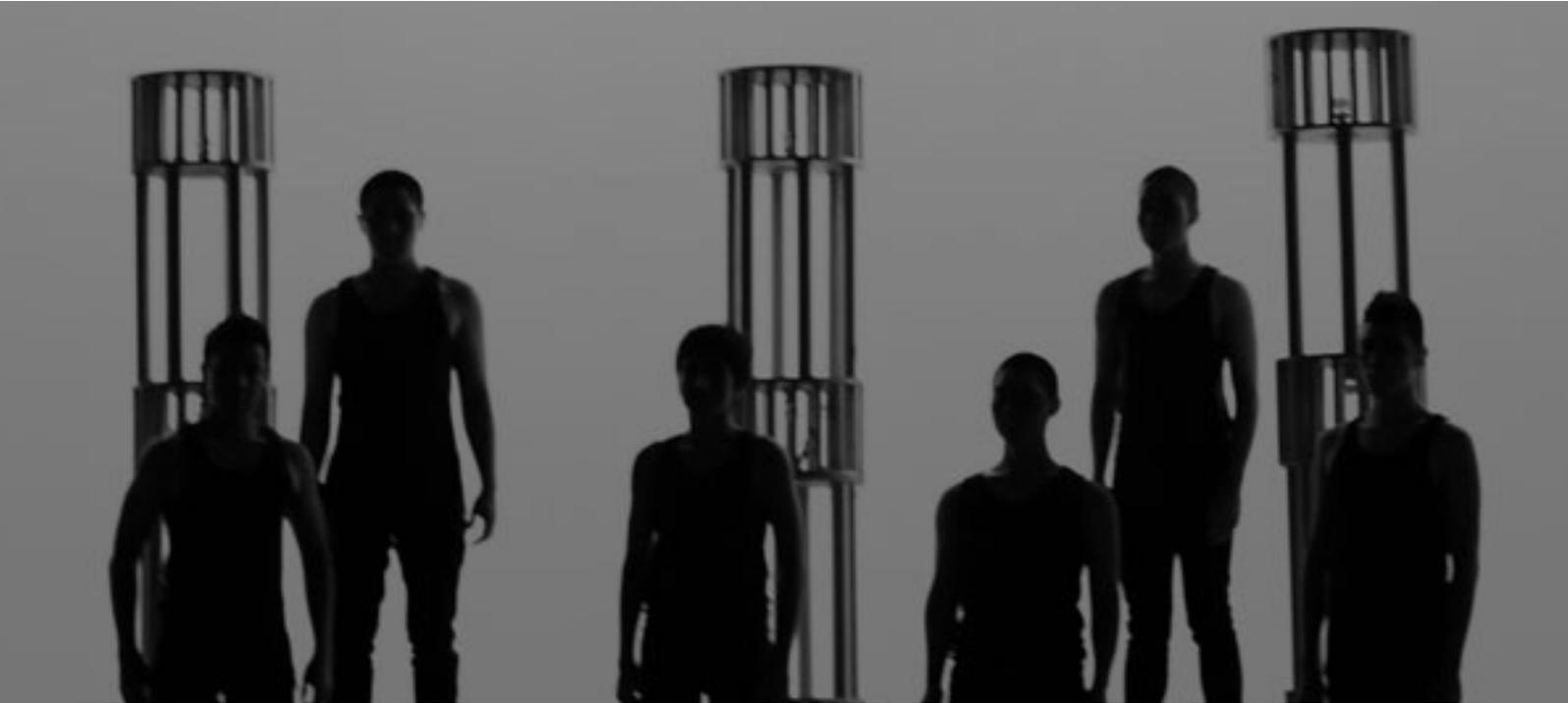
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Confrontational... controversial... challenging... contentious theatre

By Darren Scully

A few years ago a colleague and I approached our head teacher with a copy of *Illyria* by Bryony Lavery with a view to directing it with an advanced theatre ensemble. We wanted to give him a heads up to the play's graphic language and mature themes. He read the play and said in no uncertain terms that he did not like the play, nor did he want us to produce the play and asked us to reconsider. We insisted that the play really had to be done. He said, "You know it's not in me to say, 'No'. I hope you know what you're doing." In that moment both of us realized how fortunate we were to have such a progressive head teacher and that, as with good ensembles, the principal of relational trust was at the heart of the matter. As it happens, the play was performed and the head confirmed my earlier contention that what was on the page was very different in principle and in practise from what is seen on the stage. At the symposium after the final performance on the role of theatre in high schools, a parent of one the principle characters said, "I came to the theatre tonight to see my daughter perform. But I didn't see her; I saw an actor."

The anecdote points to a number of issues about the nature of contentious or controversial theatre. I'm interested in several strands:

- how to convince a head teacher to back your choice of performance
- how to deal with parental concerns in

practical ways.

As well as this, I'm interested in:

- why, as drama teachers, we should put our necks on the line for certain ideas, and ultimately
- how we manage an ensemble so that they are secure in exploring mature content and can also deal with the concerns of parents and the wider community.

For the purposes of space I want to focus on a production of *The Love of the Nightingale* by Timberlake Wertenbaker that I directed at Ruamrudee International School in November 2009.

The Love of the Nightingale is an intelligent, beautiful reworking of the Greek myth of the rape of Philomel. It explores a number of themes of interest to (not exclusively) young people: innocence and experience, sexual awakening, power, gender, war, silence. It's not an abstract exploration either: the language, however, is lyrical and the play affords a poetic treatment that must, I think, balance the graphic issues of rape and violence. It is a powerful exploration of masculinity and male violence, without polemicizing or taking a simplistic stance. If anything the play reaches out and demands that the tough questions that are posed in the play are tackled even if they are potentially unanswerable 'what makes the torturer smile?' 'Why are little girls raped and murdered in the car parks of dark cities?' It is a play about questions, questioning and the

results of silencing questions. The final line of the play is the metamorphosed Itys to Philomel "Didn't you want me to ask questions?" There is no pontificating or reducing to exhortation. It suggests the power of theatre as a redemptive force, or at least the imagination.

Saying so, however, does not make the job of persuading the Head or dealing with a concerned parent much easier. And I promise to try to give some practical advice. The problem, however, begins with Plato. Or at least in part. A casual list of texts covered in most Advanced Literature courses contains works like *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* (rarely *Titus Andronicus* though for my argument I wish it were a better play). The curriculum is crowded with crimes against humanity, genocide, rape, female genital mutilation. Literature teems with the horrors of slavery, struggles against plague and prejudice, disease and disaster, madness, murder and suicide. We can read about it, it seems, but please don't put it on the stage. Now why is that?

Plato felt that poets (artists in general) appealed to the emotions and the affective faculties and as such were to be treated with the gravest of suspicions: "poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue." (Plato 36)

The problem with theatre is that it arouses and plays upon people's emotions. Plato

contends that emotions cause people to think and behave irrationally. Since, the argument goes, an approach to the truth can only be attained through rational, structured thought, poetry necessarily prohibits any kind of movement towards knowledge. (Plato 36)

But that does not mean we are condemned to accept Plato's contention. Granted the theatre's tendency to move; Arthur Miller said the function of the theatre was "By whatever means it is accomplished, the prime business of a play is to arouse the passions of its audience so that by the route of passion may be opened up to new relationships between a man and men, and between men and Man. Drama is akin to the other inventions of man in that it ought to help us to know more and not merely to spend our feelings."

Collected Plays (1958) Introduction, Section 7

"Poetry and emotion do not need to be viewed as obstacles in our search for knowledge. Instead, they may be thought of as one of the most powerful ways we seek meaning and answers to our 'unanswerable questions.'"

I think there are two related aspects that need to be addressed: one is, of course, the lingering suspicion that theatre can actually mentally or emotionally harm spectators because they might be witnesses to acts of brutality; the other is the ethics of witnessing, the positioning of the audience.

Each day, as I have said, students are exposed to acts of unimaginable brutality: war, genocide, natural disasters, crimes, both on news and movies and TV shows. It's precisely the sanitized, desensitized nature of these media that allows for a weary, confused and defeatist attitude from an audience. It's as if these events exist independently of agency and causation, like some scourge or, cast in a tiresome ideological rote-response "It's just human nature" as if that explained or elucidated the horror. I would contend that it's precisely theatre's place to involve, emotionally and intellectually, the spectator; in order to show, through the safe medium that theatre provides, that we can be elevated above the horror. I am in broad agreement with British theatre director and writer, Declan Donnellan, who points out how we tend to "romanticize the imagination" and see it in terms of some lyrical guise. Instead, he argues, we should see the imagination as a 'big old muscle': "we use our imaginations to survive" because every moment of our waking lives we receive through our senses 'chaotic images of the universe and our imaginations make sense out of those.' The key point Donnellan makes - and it's one I constantly repeat with IB students - is that the imagination allows us "to see things as they really are". Reality "needs a lot of imagining" precisely to understand. It requires a 'feat' of imagination to overcome the glib, mechanical iteration of statistics of casual slaughter and natural disaster.

There is also the suggestion and the fear of the prurient - that we might actually enjoy watching the horror depicted, that we might not understand or be perversely corrupted by

the presentation of controversial material. This is often cast with reference to 'appropriateness.'

Rather than be on the backfoot, I would argue, and being diverted about the vague terms 'appropriate', which has always been used in the negative (i.e. "This is not appropriate") as a way of claiming the moral centre ground, I am suggesting that we must be assertive and point to the positive, educational merits of controversial theatre. Firstly we need to be clear about what happens when we watch theatre and why "We must allow audiences to identify with the show breath by breath and beat by beat". (Artaud 1974)

To return to *The Love of the Nightingale*. One of the two acts of mutilation in the play is the rape of the young, idealistic and intellectually curious Philomel. As the audience has known for some time, Tereus, the crude masculinist warrior from the North, has been harbouring lustful feelings towards his sister-in-law. The passionate and 'naïve' Philomel has inflamed him 'with her wild words' since the beginning of the play. The audience must play dumb witness to the 'inevitable' act, see Tereus confront Philomel. She says "I must consent" to which he replies, basically, "It would be better but it's not necessary". The stakes are very high. As the actor playing Philomel said in her journal: "if she doesn't convince [him] that his feelings are lustful for her (and not love), then she will be raped". After an onstage struggle, the strong and violent Tereus carries the exhausted Philomel offstage and we watch Niobe deliver a defeated monologue while the audience knows what is happening (is forced to hear the cries from offstage). As the audience pays attention to the offstage rape of Philomel, so they must have empathy with the suffering being depicted. Their - our - cognitive processes, their - our - direct and indirect experiences allow us to consider the feelings and pain and feel the ideas and understanding of what they are witnessing. As John Keefe argues, these are acts of embodiment in both actor and spectator; "a material manifestation of processes and cultural experiences that implies an ethical complicity with the actions of the stage and the actions being portrayed on that stage."

Keefe refers to Brecht's recognition of the dual nature of witnessing: If we observe sorrow on the stage and at the same time identify ourselves with it, then this simultaneous observing is a part of our observation. We are sorrowful, but at the same time we are people observing a sorrow - our own - almost as if it were detached from us. (Brecht 1965: 47)

Keefe's analysis contends that such "complicity is not a 'disjuncture' but a "double, phenomenological recognition of the stage itself and what it is showing. But that recognition is no less empathetic for being so removed; "our empathetic imagination and experience allow us to feel and know we are feeling, to think and know we are thinking at the same time. Such distance is not the death of theatre, nor the preserve of an Epic niche but a necessary and always present factor in our being able to bear witness to the acts of theatre."

The theatrical experience, then, emerges directly from an act of empathy and this

places us in a direct ethical and moral position. Far from experiencing a prurient excitement at this, the audience is confronted with "the reproduction of real-life incidents on the stage in such a way as to underline their causality and bring it to the spectator's attention. This type of art also generates emotions; such performances facilitate the mastering of reality; and this is that moves the spectator." (Brecht 1993: 81)

Brecht calls this the 'traffic between stage and auditorium' and it is produced in several distinct ways and means, but the net result is unchanging; an apprehension of what has been caused and its causes that are fundamentally ethical or moral in nature. Keefe goes on, "Ethical in the material itself, in our choice to be part of that traffic, our choice to be agents witnessing the presented actions of other agents. We may think of this as an unspoken benevolent conspiracy between actor and spectator, and spectator and spectator" Seeing things as they really are but fundamentally being aware that we are spectators engaged in a silent complicity, not with the action but with the conflict between silence and action. The cowering soldiers know what's been happening, "We saw nothing" they say. The play's theme of brutality and violence being caused by silencing and an end to questioning is brought powerfully home.

There are further objections or areas of doubt which I have heard expressed by concerned parents or management which is to do with the potential trauma to actors who have to express such powerful emotions. It is understandable but these fears come about through a fundamental lack of understanding about what it is to act. I take great care to share student journals/diaries in publicity material and in correspondence. In the case of the student playing the role of Philomel she had this to say about the staging of the abduction before the rape scene:

"We didn't want to overwhelm the audience with emotion, but to make them visually experience the beginnings of rape with a more critical approach. However, once we decided to stage it using physical theatre techniques, we saw the possibility of aestheticizing it, which we all agreed was something we needed to avoid. How could we make something so wrong, so appalling, into a beautiful dance piece? For this reason we kept a lot of natural movements in the piece; he worked with pushes and pulls, running away, pulling back - movements that showed the force of Tereus and the fear of Philomel. Chris (Tereus) and I really had to work on the balance of power between the two of us - as he was much more stronger than me, he needed to make sure that our movements were still controlled, and that he wasn't really forcing me to move in any manner. I found difficulty with this at first, because it was necessary to make our movements look extremely natural, with Philomel trying to run away from Tereus's firm grasp, but then also incorporating physical theatre lifts and turns - so it was highly choreographed. At first, I was stumbling a

The Love of the Nightingale

Timberlake Wertenbaker

Theatre in Schools
What's it all about?

The Love of the Nightingale Symposium



◆ The role of art in confronting social issues:
why *Love of the Nightingale*?



Nicha Ratana-Apiromyakij

◆ Playing Philomel: challenging roles



Natascha Yogachandra

◆ What is ensemble theatre?



Supanat Wachiralappaatoon
Chris

Stop Violence Against Women:
Why One Day is NOT Enough



Madhuri Khanna

lot - between trying to pull away from Chris's grasp and leaning back, I was constantly losing balance. Chris and I did exercises to find the balance of power - we pushed against each others shoulders/backs/hips and found how far we could push each other... We were finally able to perfect the piece and work in the text with the movements so that our words weren't undermined by the lifts and turns."

What I'm interested in here is the way the student can reflect quite sharply on the dangers of aestheticising violence and then move to a consideration of how to enact the piece in very precise performative terms. This is not a contradiction but a clear indication that a performer of powerful emotions is not swept away or caught up in the emotions but has to negotiate the way to demonstrate powerful emotions. At the same time, I also think it important to consider the even more complex concern that there is the potential in producing controversial theatre that the actors themselves might not understand fully the material they are presenting and there may be the danger of trivializing the issues. I was struck with an article by Adrian Kear in which he articulates the relationship between directors and students in adolescent theatre: "The burning questions I wanted to address concerned what might be called the ethics of performance in this theatrical representation. To what extent were the adolescent actors aware of what it was they were doing? Did they have ownership of the *mise-en-scène*, or was it subject to a calculated and controlling directorial strategy? In short, what were the relations of authorship and agency at play within the compositional process of this company?" I'd like to include two extracts from the actor playing Philomel which address these very issues:

1. Working as the chairperson of Hope is Life Foundation, I have come across several girls who have been involved in the sex slavery industry, and have worked to provide them with an education and help rehabilitate them from their severe mental injuries... Therefore, I was able to more or less utilize my experiences with these girls as a research tool - but this also presented ethical considerations - was I exploiting these girls by using them as a means to acquaint myself with the role of Philomel? As I was doing so, I realized that I wasn't exploiting these girls - I was merely telling a part of their story. However, if I didn't have this internal debate, I might have run the risk of trivializing the issue. I was spreading awareness of their misery, breaking the silence about these issues that are deemed as taboo in today's society. It really wasn't about me, or becoming a better actress. It was about all the girls who have been raped or violated.
2. Another scene that proved to be difficult was the scene in which Philomel reenacts the rape and the cutting of her tongue by means of a puppet show in the market. The stage instructions call for life-size dolls, but my director decided to use other actors instead of dolls, and I was meant to

manipulate them. However, we soon found out that this meant I wasn't necessarily 'leading' the action, rather, I was responding to it, seeing as I couldn't literally manipulate them myself - the exact opposite of our intentions. Furthermore, as I didn't choreograph it, I learned the actions after the dance movements were choreographed. Philomel is meant to tell her story the way she experienced it, and it seemed as if we were working in reverse mode - it made my task more difficult and it seemed to be a poor decision to not have me choreograph.

For me the first comment points to a strong conscious and ethically sensitive attempt to articulate the kind of negotiation involved in dealing with controversial roles and goes some way towards dealing with Kear's concern. The second comment was a very timely reminder to me as director that we must be continuously vigilant about why we are working with edgy theatre, that the ethics of controversial theatre are as much to do with the relationship between ensemble members as much as between ensemble and audience/senior management.

Considerations such as these led me to conceive of a strategy to allow the workings of the ensemble to be made part of the production itself. There is a lot of credence with theatre-makers in maintaining the 'magic' or 'wonder' of theatre. And this is fair enough but there are times when it makes sense to reveal how it's all done. In the case of controversial theatre it makes perfect sense to explain why. In early communication with the high school principal (this in a Catholic school run by Redemptorist priests) I outlined the idea of having a symposium after the final performance of *The Love of the Nightingale*. Guest speakers, ensemble members, teachers would be invited to speak about the play and the role of theatre in high schools. Parents would be invited to comment in a plenary session, the Parent-Teacher Association would be given an opportunity to express their views. This was advertised well in advance and the symposium filmed alongside the production itself. Actors were 'prepped', not with specific comments or propaganda, but with specific aspects to cover. These were:

- Stop violence against women: why one day is not enough
- Playing Philomel: challenging roles
- The role of art in confronting social issues: why *The Love of the Nightingale*?
- What is ensemble theatre?

Addressing the first topic, a student speaker spoke about "countries where honour killings (the murder of women, typically by male family members, in the name of family honour), trafficking or genital mutilation occur" but also about the notion "we need to do more and we need to do better. Too often women have to suffer in silence, ashamed and afraid to seek justice. Too often they are subject to sexual violence as a method of war, and too often impunity prevails and crimes go unpunished. Too often women are treated as victims only and not recognized as and supported to be the important agents of change which they are."



The actor playing Philomel emerged after changing to deliver a very moving (in fact much less controlled) talk about her work for the Hope is Life foundation, specifically the trafficking of young girls across country borders to be sold to brothel owners as a commodity for the sex industry and how playing the role of Philomel opened up disturbing but positive understanding. Another cast member spoke passionately and articulately about the boundaries between life and art and the responsibility of the artist to deal with burning issues.

The actor playing the brutish Tereus delivered a clear (and gentle) commentary on the rehearsal process, the workings of the ensemble and deconstructing before the audiences' eyes any concerns about being traumatised or corrupted by playing a rapist.

The symposium had to be clearly organized and managed. On this occasion there were no major concerns expressed or counter arguments but a production team should be prepared for them. I remember a parent at a symposium after *Illyria* saying, "After only five minutes I had had enough (of the graphic language and stories about torture and mutilation) and wanted to leave". My heart sank but the parent continued: "I was glad I didn't." before going on to praise the play's bravery.

What's important I think is that teachers and directors convinced about the merits of a play they know will potentially cause controversy is that they address confidently and proactively administration and parents in advance of the show. I have found the response to bold, edgy productions, on the part of teenagers and their parents, has been very

positive. However, we have a responsibility to recognise and appreciate parental concern and as such we need to provide clear understanding of potentially disturbing content in advance through promotional material, on the school theatre website and through any educational handouts or programmes. Written parental permission is also helpful for all young people participating in ensemble theatre to ensure that communication channels remain open.

Confrontational theatre has to see itself as a means to open up a space for reflection and debate. Theatre needs to assert itself as a powerful corrective to the violence and commodified cruelty of TV and film. In replying to a question about *Illyria* in an interview with Jim Mulligan, about the decision to write and produce the play, Bryony Lavery said, *'Theatre is a dangerous thing. I had to be ready for the fact that nobody would do the play. But remember it is fiction. The place for brutality and horror is on the stage not in life and I believe human beings can rehearse for reality through drama. It is the nature of theatre to experience the inconceivable. Illyria has a strong moral standpoint and it doesn't leave people in the horror. The journey is through horror to hope and resolution and to peace which are huge and mighty things.'*

Despite the real obstacles educators daily face in teaching and defending difficult material, theatre is in many ways an ideal forum for young people to confront and channel disturbing and important questions, and theatre education fails if it cannot begin to address the contentious and controversial.

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