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The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show as Ethnodrama

ABSTRACT

In The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show, recently performed in a tent outside La Mama Theatre as a part of the 'Explorations season, I speak about the world, the street, the world of the street through the eyes of a poet. The experience represented in the play was drawn, as well as written. It was read, seen and interpreted by passers-by but the 'reality' of the situation was never far away, despite all the layers of illusion. For when we put poetry in with the junkies and prostitutes, it is bound to be overshadowed by the darkness of its surroundings. The play explores homelessness and Art, subjective and objective perceptions of experience. It is written in a conversational style that questions then attempts to transcend the limits of theatre. This work exists on the street. I cannot show you the exact theatre where the outcaste weakly poet is really performed because it is not a theatre at all. It exists alongside public rubbish bins, in the growling and groaning of bearded men, in the images of blood-filled needles in the gutter and real-life street prostitutes. The paper will explore this play from the perspective of its creation and performance.

KEYWORDS

poet, poetry
theatre
ethno-drama
real fiction
theatre

INTRODUCTION

In 'The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show', performed in 2013 in a tent outside La Mama Theatre as a part of the 'Explorations' season, I speak about the world, the street, the world of the street through the eyes of a poet (Welsh 2013). The experience represented in the play, represented in an illustrated poem, was drawn by a visual artist/illustrator as well as written. It was read, seen and interpreted by passers-by, but the 'reality' of the situation was never far away, despite all the layers of illusion. For when we put poetry in with the junkies and prostitutes, it is bound to be overshadowed by the darkness of its surroundings. The play explores homelessness and art, subjective and objective perceptions of experience. It is written in a conversational style that questions then attempts to transcend the limits of theatre.

OUTCASTE POET AS ETHNO-DRAMA

There are at least two ways of understanding the term, ethno-theatre (Saldana, 2011). Saldana defines ethno-theatre at one point in his work as ‘dramatising data’. This implies that the process of making theatre can be used to store and present qualitative data, also that information collected from elsewhere can be transformed into drama or performance for an audience. How we understand this notion is central to this paper and my work generally, which I refer to as ‘real fiction’ (Dundler-Welsh, 2013). This concept conceives of the social world as consisting of language that is observed, recorded and then played out on the stage by actors.

Elsewhere, Saldana (2011) describes ethno-theatre or ethno-drama as involving real participants in the process of making theatre. If we understand the term as describing the dramatisation of data then we are considering life, people’s stories, emotions, narratives as data. This alone is deeply problematic for all these notions are so subjective and data such as this has been classified as ‘transgressive’ by some language and literary theorists (St. Pierre, 1997). ‘Involving’ so-called participants in the process of making theatre is also considered deeply problematic, not only because it introduces ethical questions into its methodology. For the theatre maker, it also affects the creative process. How does this change what theatre is, where it takes place, who makes it?

My work, both as a practitioner and researcher, seems to belong to the category of ethno-drama (Saldana, 2005) or ‘Reality Theatre’ (Perry, 2007). Much of Saldana’s work blurs the line between action-based sociological research and theatre. Similarly I consider myself, when creating performances like the Outcaste Weakly Poet to be primarily working as a social researcher, with performance being only a secondary concern. This, however, may be self-deceptive because my approach is based on the notion that social research, of the kind I undertake when I practice ‘real fiction’, makes good theatre.

It is indeed my hope that the work I undertake as a practitioner, like Saldana’s, will ‘...capture verisimilitude and universality through their primary sources for monologue and dialogue: reality’ (2005, p.3). The process by which a work is created that might be considered either ethno-drama or real fiction can be distinguished from the theatre. The work does not involve an established or published script, utilised for performance but a reflection on experience from which a script emerges. This is because the processes employed are not necessarily or entirely directed toward the goal of a public performance.

The stated objective of practitioners such as Lloyd Jones (2014), like my own, is often the exploration of an issue not the presentation of a public performance.

Whilst it may be the case that many plays or theatre pieces seek to explore social issues through their performance, privileging this exploration above the public performance distinguishes the form from mere political or issue-based theatre. This means that a rehearsal merely consisting of conversation about experience that circles around what might be contained in the theatrical piece is as important to the process as rehearsal, *per se*. The technique is used regularly and to great effect by the Lloyd Jones Ensemble at La Mama Theatre in Melbourne (Jones 2013)

In the example of 'The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show', the experience being portrayed in the writings that guide the performance explore some controversial and sensitive issues. For example, the street poet (me) describes his relationship with a "street friend" to whom he refers as an 'ex-hooker', while calling himself a 'junky', and it has been suggested through the process that some of the representations feed stereotypes of drug users, sex workers and indigenous people:

Would you like a piece of poetry there, Sir? Would you like a piece of poetry there today, Madam? Just the repetition of those words meant anything could be going on around me and it usually was but I just offered my poetry to passers-by. All anyone heard me say was 'small donation?' (Welsh 2014)

This work exists on the street. I cannot describe the precise location of the theatre where the outcaste weakly poet is really performed because it is not a theatre at all. It exists alongside public rubbish bins, in the growling and groaning of bearded men, in the images of blood-filled needles in the gutter and real-life street prostitutes.

I would refute this suggestion by claiming that the work is based on my own experience and that all the characters referred to are based on actual social encounters. If the way in which this is done is somehow confrontational or socially alienating for the audience then perhaps this is because it is outside the experience of many theatre goers. The fact that it is not outside the experience of the poet (me) only serves to further alienate the audience.

In other writings, I have referred to the 'real fiction' process as a 'conversational reality'. I claim that the process of creating a play or a performance that reflects on a particular social issue or experience involves a series of conversations, relating the experience from conversational participant in social reality to the writer to the director to

the actor or performer, all with an emphasis on the original experience.

The process of relating the experience in 'The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show' does not follow the time-line described here because the social experience in conversational reality is performed by the original participant. Therefore the conversation that usually occurs between the writer and the conversational participant is replaced by a conversation between the director and the performer, who is both the source of the work in social, conversational reality and on the stage in the theatre. Therefore, the conversation that occurred between the writer/performer/subject or source of experience and the director involved a reflection on the social implications of the work.

For example the director of the 2013-14 performances of 'The Outcaste', Kerry Davies, offers a woman's perspective on the following extract:

Here she was holding her life together for some shitty café job, just being an ordinary person, tryin to forget the 'dirtiness' of her past. She once told me bein a hooker suited her when she was on smack because she felt dirty either way. She needed to get money for smack so she sold her body and she needed the smack to live with the fact she'd just sold her body. The smack made her feel dirty (and I knew what she meant) so it wasn't too much of a leap to fuck for money but all in all it was a recipe for misery. The smack made her feel dirty, fuckin for money made her feel dirtier. (extract from the performance 'The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show', Welsh 2013-14, La Mama Theatre/Testing Grounds)

Whilst, for me, this section merely described my experience and my encounter with the sex worker in the language of the 'street poet' character, a part of my own self and voice, the director saw it differently. She perceived the experience from the point of view of the 'sex worker' character and the limited choices she had as a woman in a patriarchal society.

This then fed a renewed discussion of class, central to the entire piece, reinvigorated by this new feminist point of view. The rehearsal turned into a social debate about social oppression, class and privilege, all inspired by the creative work. It also illustrated the way in which creative work and class factors contribute the voice of the narrative, what is permitted and what is not. Whilst the 'street poet' is freely able to call the sex worker a 'hooker', the arts practitioner and, to an even greater extent, the theatre theorist cannot use such language.

The characters I embody in the play, 'The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show', are records of my social encounters with them. The performance, then, rather than being an artistic form, becomes a record of these social encounters. However, unlike Saldana, my involvement in the work, which essentially consists of stories collected from others in the

case of both Saldana's work and my own. As distinct from Saldana, I do not resist the temptation to act as a mediator between reality and the audience. This inevitably affects the work, in this instance at least and distinguishes it from verbatim theatre.

The Hungry Guy

There were times when I saw grown men crying on the street, really sobbing like children. Or howling like animals. And all because they missed the soup-van!!

Oh Nooo! What am I gunna do? I'm gunna be hungry! I'm gunna be soooo hungry!!' and all the people would just walk past and laugh because the hungry guy just pissed himself while he stood there crying...(Welsh 2014)

The poet, like the hungry guy, himself exists as a spectacle on the street and, in many ways, the passer-by is not a passer-by and now you never can be a passer-by because I am presenting this paper here and so you know me for something other than my role on the street. The game is up. My trick has been realised. I've been found out. If you saw me there now, you'd immediately recognise me as inauthentic, which I always have been in a way but by presenting the play and presenting this paper, I am removing the mask.

You will know exactly what I am doing when you see me sitting on the side of the street. You will not wonder, as many have, if I am a beggar, how I get there? Are they doing this now? Is this his poetry? Is he hungry? I'll give him some money and take his piece of paper anyway....' Then you take it and the idea is that the work brings you to tears. There have been people who been offended by just this very process. I have deprived you of this reaction and ruined this part of the theatre.

I never quite understood how you could be offended by receiving poetry but now that I reflect on it I can see why they felt duped. And it wasn't anything to do with money or being conned in any conventional way. They felt duped because the social encounter they just experienced involved a set of assumptions. Walking down the street, see a man sitting on a milk crate, looks bedraggled. Poor fellow. 'Would you like a piece of poetry there today, Madam?' It's a new a thing. It's like the Big Issue. He's a beggar, a drug addict, a junkie. I'll take pity on the poor soul.

You take the poem like a poisoned chalice from which you are yet to sip. You put it in your pocket and go about your day. A little time later, waiting for a tram, you pull it back out and start to read, mostly out of boredom. Oh dear, oh no. This is wonderful, this is beautiful, this is so sad...What have I done? What am I? How could I have thought such horrible things about that poor man? Everybody just walking past him, treating him

like...And so you go back. Then you find me sitting there selling my poetry and you give me some more money and ask if I'm okay, which you already did by taking the poetry in the first place. Then you explain to me that you feel bad, you didn't know until you read the poetry. It should be published. They should have people like you set up on street corners throughout the country, to remind us not to walk past, just not to walk past.

I can never reproduce this feeling for you. You can't ever be that passer-by now. The Outcaste Weakly Poet (as opposed to the 'stage show' form) is a theatre of social encounter and this scene is being played out at a conference as a paper. As a result of this artifice, the previous incarnation on the street is affected. The play has a similar yet not identical influence on the work.

Like attendees at this conference, the play's audience has the experience of social encounter on the street presented as an artifice in a theatre. Therefore there is something very melancholy about the process, something bleak that reminds us of our mortality. It's like I am killing off the element of surprise with each person who would take the poetry and the next time we talked, it was going to have to be a real conversation. Also, the next time they bought the poem, it would be based on either the quality of this poem or their own sense of values:

Extract from play:

The police speak to me. Not because I've broken any law, perse. I've made a spectacle of myself and there has to be a law against that!

The people don't just say no. They're passionate about it! They're not just saying no to this poetry on this street. They're saying no to any poetry on any street.

The ones who say yes are kind of the same but the opposite as the ones who say no. They're not just saying yes to my poetry on this street. They're saying yes to me, my being, my existence. There're many of them over the journey, everywhere I go and, with them...it's like the Indian woman whose father owned the shop I lived above in King street. She was in an arranged marriage. 'Do you love him?' I ask. 'I'm learning to love him.' She replies. Those who love poetry are arranged marriages for me and them, learning to love one another (Welsh, 2013).

The play, like the street, is still contextualised in a conversation between the poet and the reader of his poem/s. This inevitably affects the way in which the work is performed and directed. The concern is with enticing the audience into a conversation, attempting to make them feel free to engage as a listener in a conversation rather than the more alienating notion of being an audience member in a stylised performance.

The possibility of gross misinterpretation still exists in the performance of the play in the precise same way as it does on the street. The 'poet' can still be classified a

‘homeless man’ or suffer social judgement from passers-by (Welsh, 2012), ‘The No Teeth People Essay...’).

This process of distributing poetry can be understood as begging by the audience in the play, though they are insiders, like radical psychiatrist R.D. Laing’s insiders, in a way that the ‘passers-by’ in social reality are not. In the play I talk about the passers-by, in their greed, believing I was begging. Implicit in this is the assumption that the audience be convinced that I was not begging, accept this hypothesis and move on with me through the performance.

The audience has become like the friend who sits with me while I sell poetry. Indeed, at one point during the performance, I invite an audience member to come and sit with me while I sell poetry. I speak about the role such a person plays and, in this sense, the audience literally *becomes* the person who sits with me while I sell poetry. A member of the audience becomes a participant, as though it were a children’s pantomime.

In closing, I would like to leave you with what I believe to be one of the definitive Outcaste Weakly Poet piece:

Death The Great Leveller

Or ‘The Privilege Of Dignity’ by Scott Welsh

They put him on the floor
Of the public hospital
He was a casualty in war
On underclass that’s all
A delusional drunk
Hope long sunk
Holes in his face
Caved in the place
He was bashed last week
No retribution he’d seek
Left bloodied in the gutter
The doctors there’d mutter
“We’ll make him feel at home,
Halls like streets let him roam!”
Nurse said ‘There’s an empty bed’
Doctor said ‘Don’t fuck with his head,
Smack addicts ought to die alone.’
Then he sneered, with a righteous tone,

Said ‘Why should he
Have respectability
In death?
His breath

And his nappy
Smell the same
We've won the war
Won the game.

Let the dying hobo
Roll around on the floor
We'll give him some mor-
phine for his pain. That is all.
And if you hear a blood-curdling call
Assume it's the sound of homelessness
He's the same animal in life and death
Deserves no more or less dignity
Just remember to change the nappy.

But he winced and writhed and screamed
And to all, including me, he seemed
To die just as he did live
In pain as if just to give
Us one more reason to hate the
World and its hypocrisy

On the ground
Rolled around
Tried in vain
Just to gain
Access to
The toilet to
Relieve him
-self
Reaches for
What?

Pissed in gutters
His life through
Slept on steps
As if to
Snub society
Now for once
He wants to be
Free to piss
In the toilet, see
But for the privilege
Of dignity
He never, ever worked.

My grandmother died with gold
Rattling around her wrists, cold
In the end
As this friend

Of mine whose last name I knew not
But when he saw me smiled and said, 'Scott.'

(Welsh, 2013)

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown the relationship between the social reality of the street, with an encounter between 'street poet' and 'passers-by', with the social reality of the theatre and a conversational interaction between the performer and the audience. I have illustrated how the art-form of 'street poetry' is re-contextualised as a performance. The social interaction between performer and director re-states its intention through theatrical motifs such as rehearsal and indeed performance. However, these motifs are utilised for the purpose of considering the social issues explored in the piece, such as homelessness, social inequities, racism and (inadvertently) gender issues. This distinguishes the work as ethno-drama, rather than standard, conventional theatre.

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Scott Welsh is a playwright, poet and PhD candidate at Victoria University. He holds a Masters in Philosophical Studies. His research interests include theatre as research, ethno-drama and drama as education. He continues to produce and perform original theatre throughout Australia, including the never-ending tour of 'The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show'.

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