



‘One of the aims of performances about history is to make it possible for the spectators to see the past in a new or different way’, in other words, to remember it differently. How do your chosen plays or productions enable this changed remembering?¹

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In *Performance, Memory and Landscape*, Mike Pearson argues, ‘Interpretation is always informed by present interests and values: we produce the past in the present’.² At every stage of your life you will remember a past moment in a different way as you look back from an ever-changing, ever-influencing present. Therefore no remembrance or performance of a past event or moment will ever be exactly the same as the original, it is always different and sometimes completely new. Richard Schechner explores this idea in detail in terms of restorative performance and behaviour in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, asserting that ‘The original “truth” or “source” of the behaviour may be lost, ignored or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honoured and observed’.³ This is akin to memory recall as personal memory is highly subjective; it is you and your moment, your memory and remembrance. However, there are past events which are part of a shared or collective memory which ask not to be changed by the present, but remain remembered as they were; known or taught to us as ‘history’. History is often looked at as an objective past, historical ‘fact’ or rather ‘truth’. However, historiographers, such as Keith Jenkins and Walter Benjamin, have debated this point and argue that just as an individual looks to personal memories and adjusts them with their present self, so does a historian: in *The Angel of History*, Stéphane Mosés cites Benjamin's understanding that ‘Writing history is not rediscovering the past; it is creating it from our own present.’⁴ During the reign of the Third Reich, history was accessed and taught in devastating ways highlighting the power of history and collective memory. What is interesting here is the collective result of such recall; that most people will have a very similar knowledge, or memory, of these past events.

Jenkins argues that ‘history is always for someone’⁵ which links it to theatrical performance as performance is always for someone; as Jaques Rancière states, ‘there is no theatre without a spectator’.⁶ What is very different about the two is the way they are accessed and responded to. Unlike reading a history book where the events are presented mainly as fact, the theatre provides multiple signs that lead you away from reality and ask you to suspend your disbelief. As Freddie Rokem states, in *Performing History*, in terms of

¹ Freddie Rokem, *Performing History, Theatrical Representations of the past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p. 9

² Mike Pearson, *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), p. 28

³ Richard Schechner, ‘Restoration of Behaviour’ in *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 35.

⁴ Stéphane Mosés, *The Angel of History, Rosenweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, trans. by Barbara Harshav (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 101

⁵ Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. xiii

⁶ Jaques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 2

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the 'history play', 'It is obviously never the event itself we see on stage'.⁷ In theatre nothing on stage is technically 'real'; everything we see has been contrived and rehearsed, and the only thing 'real' about it is its 'presentness' and realness as a live event. A performance, therefore, is always part of the present that constantly influences how we see or react to the past. As a result, playwrights use the historical past for specific reasons, ultimately to say something within the present. When playwrights use a past event they usually rely on a collective knowledge of that event, or what Tony Judt terms 'a shared memory of history as we learnt it'.⁸ In this sense, although history may not actually be as objective as we would like, this shared memory can be accepted, if not as 'fact', at least as a 'truth'.

This essay looks at the effects of performance on these accepted historical 'truths' and shows how they try to make, even force, the audience to 'see the past in a new or different way',⁹ through the 'presentness' of theatrical performance. This will be explored through two different forms of performance or theatre that use historical 'facts' or 'truths': the 'history play' and verbatim theatre. The history play here refers to plays that heavily rely on or use historical past as a base for an overall fictional piece of work. Verbatim theatre is theatre which uses the direct words of individuals from transcripts and interviews which are then edited into performance, claiming, as Will Hammond notes in *Verbatim Verbatim*, a 'claim to veracity'.¹⁰ The productions explored are *War Horse* as adapted for stage by Nick Stafford, first performed in October 2007 at the Royal National Olivier Theatre and verbatim piece *The Riots* written by Gillian Slovo and directed by Nicholas Kent, first performed at the Tricycle Theatre in 2011. Each production uses elements of the past and relies on a collective acceptance and memory of these events, using performance in aim to shed new light on the past.

The production *War Horse* originally came from a piece of fiction by author Michael Morpurgo, adapted by Nick Stafford and brought to stage by directors Marianne Elliott and Tom Morris and the Handspring Puppet Company (2007). As Richard Curtis says, this production uses a plot of 'one [puppet] horse, [and] one boy, [to reveal] the horror and scale of the First World War'.¹¹

The set of *War Horse* is minimalistic, with a projection screen hanging at the back of the stage. Projected onto this screen are a series of drawings and sketches that reflect the setting of the action. In contrast to this minimalism are the props or rather puppets of the Handspring Puppet Company. Life size, movable puppets of horses and other animals focus the attention of the audience to the story of the horse. The production uses a naturalistic style of acting alongside the puppet creations which are very obviously controlled by costumed stage hands. This is a reflection of the productions use of a very real historical topic in a fictional and constructed environment.

This kind of performance demands, along with the expected suspension of disbelief, what Rokem terms, a 'meta-theatrical awareness with regard to the theatre as well as history [that] enables them [the creative team] to communicate directly to the audience that, even when presented on the stage as a theatrical performance, it actually presents or refers to events that have actually taken place'.¹² The history play demands two levels of thought from the audience; the suspension of disbelief but also a remembrance of the past it is referring to.

⁷ Rokem, p. 6

⁸ Tony Judt (1998, 58), in Attilio Favorini, *Memory in Play* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 257

⁹ Rokem, p. 9

¹⁰ Will Hammond and Dan Steward, *Verbatim Verbatim* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), p. 10

¹¹ Richard Curtis, 'Spielberg Took me on the Ride of my Life', *London Evening Standard*, 22.12.2011, p. 33

¹² Rokem, p. 7

Most adult members of the audience will have a distant, often taught, personal and shared memory of WWI, which the live production will influence. It is interesting to note that *War Horse* is not directed solely at adults, but also children. For these young audience members the production may be their first exposure to the history of WWI. So the production will be leading a mixed audience of those with some memory of WWI and those with none. In either case it is directing a dramatic yet sentimental approach to WWI. However, rather than focusing on the numbers of human casualties and suffering, we learn of that of the horses. In this respect *War Horse* subverts our memories of human experience and alerts the audience to a different side of war. Although the production asserts a different view point towards war, it still invokes the same sentimental atmosphere that we are used to when approaching the historical subject. It also supports the feeling of distance from the subject with its creative and artistic approach to staging.

In contrast, is the production *Oh What a Lovely War* produced by Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop, first performed in 1963 Theatre Royal Stratford East. In the current climate, the concept of 'war' is only real concept for those people directly involved, in the British case, with the fighting in the Middle East. In most cases, those not directly involved hear of the tragedies and horrors through the news in which despite stirring feelings of empathy keep a sense of detachment. In 1963 people, the audience members, still had very vivid and personal memories of not only the First World War, but World War Two, where not only those fighting were involved. Unlike *War Horse*, *Lovely War* uses a range of techniques to create an almost farcical atmosphere, rather than sentimentality, in order to make very direct comments about the operation of the First World War. Factual information presented on a projection screen, and familiar war songs are contrasted with unconventional acting techniques, improvisation and pierrot costumes.

Both *War Horse* and *Lovely War* provide their audiences with a different approach to the concept of 'war' as they know, or remember it. Although creating a familiar sentimental atmosphere, *War Horse* shows audiences a different viewpoint and a dramatic representation of war that most audience members have never experienced. In contrast, *Lovely War* faces an audience with mainly direct and personal memories of war and perhaps a dramatic and sentimental representation would almost not be dramatic enough and would not stir up different emotions and reactions that the farcical production did.

Unlike the history play which mainly takes historical truths as a base for fiction, verbatim theatre lays a fairly substantial claim to fact. As Will Hammond and Dan Steward note, 'This claim to veracity on the part of the theatre maker, however hazy or implicit, changes everything. Immediately we approach the play not as a play but also as a source of accurate information. We trust and expect we are not being lied to'.¹³ We may not be being lied to, but we are certainly being coerced to respond to this theatre in a certain way. Just as verbatim playwright David Hare argues, this claim to veracity 'also changes nothing. [...] the fact that the people in his plays actually exist and the words in his play were actually spoken by no way alters his role as a dramatist'.¹⁴ He is still working with material and manipulating it into a performance. The problem he faces, that a director of a history play might not, is a responsibility to the characters he is portraying or using. That aside, like a history play, verbatim uses the past to say something about the present, through performance, deliberately guiding the audience as to how to 're-remember' this past event.

Unlike *War Horse*, Gillian Slovo's *The Riots* has been produced in a climate where its subject is still fresh, even more so than *Lovely War* as the production was performed just three months after the London riots. Members of the audience will have very vivid and

¹³ Hammond and Steward, p. 10

¹⁴ Ibid.

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personal memories of the riots, though many of them through detachment of newspapers and television. *The Riots* aims to produce a piece of theatre that accesses a variety of different memories and opinions about the London riots in the hope the audience will remember and think of the event and the cause differently. Esther Addley writes that '*The Riots*, in many ways, is about her [Slovo's] own journey ... She hopes her audiences can have some of the same experience'.¹⁵ Although it is in no way articulated in an aggressive and forceful manner Slovo has accepted that it is *her* journey which the audience are embarking on and she hopes that they will come to the same conclusion she did.

Faced with an audience of individuals that know the events of the riots well, the production team are aided by the theatre set up. Karen Gaylord argues that, '[T]he spectator [...] is "taken out of himself" [sic] and becomes for the time part of an ad hoc collective consciousness, ready to find meaning and significance in the events taking place on stage'.¹⁶ This state is enforced particularly by the position of the audience all grouped together in similar, if not identical seats. As the playwright and or director cast their actors into specific roles, so they cast the audience, into one body that they lead in a certain way. Furthermore, as Max Stafford-Clark says 'You have to define who you're talking to. You have to, as it were, cast the audience'.¹⁷ The audience of *The Riots* practically become this singular cast character as all actors on stage interact almost solely with the audience and not the others present on stage. It is important to remember however, the individual memories and capacities of the audience member as noted by both Rancière and Keir Elam.

Like both *War Horse* and *Lovely War*, *The Riots* uses a minimalistic set and a projection screen covers the back wall. The stage is also surrounded by large metal grates that remain throughout the performance. In the first half, which is mainly a narrative of events, the set contains a desk and two chairs stage left and two chairs and a stool placed stage right. In the second half, the content is more reflective; the desk is removed and in its place lie an immovable pile of packaging boxes for items such as televisions and shoes. During the performance characters interact with these props depending on their role, which will be discussed shortly. The naturalistic elements of the set reflect the 'reality' of the content, enforcing the idea that the information being presented is true.

The role of the projection screen is of particular interest and importance in terms of presenting the information in new or different ways. When any character is giving a detailed account of the events over a specific time period, a map with moving images supporting the facts given in their speech is projected, along with their name; again, emphasising the factual element of the production. In contrast, when a rioter or 'hoodie' takes to the stage to give their view, they are cast in shadow, with no projected name with which to identify their 'real' self, but instead a graffiti-style image of a Nike trainer. In addition to this, as they exit the stage they sound an aggressive cheer and remove a chair from the stage. Slovo articulates to Addley that 'that difficulty in finding rioters' voices is reflected on the stage, where the characters appear as shadowy figures. "It's a visual representation of the fact that we are all living in the same country" says Slovo, "and yet their lives do not intersect with ours".¹⁸ But this explanation is not made clear in any aspect of the performance and further distinguishes the rioters as an 'unknown' or 'other' against the predominately middle class audience. Another role of the projection screen is to display the official facts, figures and statistics of the riots, sometimes in support of what is being said on stage, and sometimes in opposition. For example Labour MP Dianne Abbott, played by Dona Croll, places blame of the riots on racial grounds when, as presented on the screen, 40% of the rioters were white. In this respect

¹⁵ Esther Addley, 'Burn Britain Burn: Gillian Slovo's *The Riots*', *The Guardian*, 22.11.2011

¹⁶ Karen Gaylord (1983: 136), in Susan Bennet, *Theatre Audiences, A Theory of Production and Reception*, p. 139

¹⁷ Hammond and Steward, p. 69

¹⁸ Addley

The Riots staging techniques remind the audience that while the production claims the voices of real people, their words are not always the actual *reality*.

In a climate where the news is so accessible and people are easily able to publicise their views on sites such as Facebook and Twitter, it seems almost impossible that Slovo's and Kent's production could actually shed any new light on the subject of the very recent London Riots. Through the use of verbatim theatre and a projection screen, Slovo and Kent give the audience a chance to absorb a variety of different views and statistics that emphasise the fact that while we may often hear a variety of different views, they are just opinions and, like memories, are highly subjective. There is however a slight flaw in the production as we get only a partial and almost stereotypical representation of the rioters which echoes the reality of the situation. What *The Riots* does do is to utilise the 'presentness' of performance to engage with a still relevant subject encouraging people to look outside their personal memories and relate to others and the wider issue.

The present will always influence the way you respond to the past. Theatrical performance is always live and therefore part of that influencing present. Theatre about history asks the audience to remember those past events or truths and then adjust them as the performance directs them to. In many ways the theatre directs audience members to temporarily suspend their role as an individual and become part of a collective consciousness. The theatrical performance then addresses this collective consciousness while influencing and altering the individual self and memories. Performance of historical events or truths relies on the collective memory of the past or past event; the performance will then work with or against this memory to say something about that past in the present. Michael de Certeau argues that 'historians can write only by combining within their practice the "other" that moves and misleads them and the real that they can represent only through fiction'.¹⁹ Unlike historians; playwrights, directors and creative teams are open about their methods of creating productions based on historical truths from their present, for the present and for their specific purpose. The 'other' that moves and misleads them is the theatrical world of stage, set, actors, audience and above all fiction. The theatrical world is all about the suspension of disbelief and however much based on 'fact' is only ever going to be fictional representation of reality. Theatrical performances about history use the power of personal and collective memory and the influential 'presentness' of performance as the dominant force in guiding interpretation.

¹⁹ Michael de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 14

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