



Contemporary Performance Portfolio

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Piece A: 'Malala was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen': What Role do Fiction and Reality Play in the Creation of Theatre-in-Education Performances?

In our workshop with Andrew Breakwell, a Theatre-in-Education director, we explored theatre's potential for education and social action by co-creating representations of Malala Yousafzai's story for a young audience. Seeing as Theatre-in-Education is considered a 'hybrid between...aesthetic and learning objectives', it was not surprising that Andrew asked us to research Malala's story in great detail before the session.¹ Having done this, I was able to directly experience the differences between 'learning' as a result of online research, and 'learning' through theatrical methods. In order to discuss one such difference I will focus on our use of freeze-frames to depict the moment of the shooting.

One of the greatest differences between the media accounts and our freeze-frame was the fact that those elements which can easily be omitted in media reports had to be specified when staged. While the media tended to offer only basic information (such as 'Taliban members [shot] her in the head'², 'Malala was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen'³) alongside a photograph of Malala, the use of actor's bodies as a representation technique obliged us to make detailed choices about elements such as the exact positioning and facial expressions of the shooters. Corresponding with the 'concretion of the abstract' advocated by Boal⁴, we were thus forced to give thought to details such as what the shooter was feeling, which in turn raised questions regarding ideologies and sociopolitical pressures which are easily glossed over by the media.

However, although the improvisation of such elements encourage critical discussion, they also raise questions about the extent to which Theatre-in-Education is responsible for helping the audience distinguish between performance elements that correspond to researched information, and those developed from artistic improvisation. While Barker regarded the accuracy of theatre as fatal to its 'unsettling and revolutionary power'⁵, it is important to recognise that improvised information may encourage the audience to perceive the theatrical depiction (in this case of the shooting) as what Schechner called a 'make-belief' performance.⁶ This is a performance in which the boundary between what is fictional and what is 'everyday reality' is blurred to such an extent that the audience may be persuaded to accept certain fictional elements of the performance as social reality.⁷ For example, wanting to draw attention to possible social or religious pressures behind the shooter's decision to shoot Malala, we decided that he would adopt a posture symbolic of religion in order to achieve the Brechtian goal of reproducing incidents 'in such a way as to underline their causality'⁸. However, as there is no guarantee that an audience will decode the religious element as fictional and symbolic, our artistic choice could ultimately encourage false beliefs about social reality, such as equating the Taliban with Islam.

Given that education, and ultimately social action, is central to Andrew's approach, even the unintentional creation of such false beliefs can be considered highly problematic. It can thus be argued that the relationship between fiction and reality in Theatre-in-Education must be made more apparent than for an audience of theatre without a social agenda.

¹ Geoffrey Readman, 'All this and more': learning through participation in Theatre in Education', given as a handout in Contemporary Performance Module (25 November 2015), p. 105.

² Bryan Logan, '8 of the 10 men accused in the shooting Malala Yousafzai have been secretly acquitted', *Business Insider*, 07 June 2015, <<http://www.businessinsider.com/malala-yousafzai-shooters-secretly-acquitted-2015-6?IR=T>> [accessed 02 January 2016].

³ Mishal Husain, 'Malala: The girl who was shot for going to school', *BBC*, 07 October 2013, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24379018>> [accessed 02 January 2016].

⁴ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 122.

⁵ Howard Barker, 'Theatre Without a Conscience', in *Modern Theories of Drama*, ed. by George W. Brandt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 56.

⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 42.

⁷ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, p. 43.

⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (Bloomsbury, London: 1965), p. 27.

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Piece B: Nottingham Lakeside Arts and Twitter: To What Extent Does Marketing Strategy Influence the Creation of Theatre Venues' Social Media Content?

In our session with Sofia Nazar-Chadwick, Head of Audience Development and Marketing at Nottingham Lakeside Arts (henceforth: NLA), the company's social media presence was pinpointed as an area of marketing that is increasing in importance. This reflective piece therefore discusses the way in which NLA's Twitter account reflects their broader marketing aims.

Comparing NLA's Twitter account to their marketing strategies concerning social media, there seems to be a disparity between NLA's abstract aims and their 'real-life' execution. In theory, ideas such as '[blogging] about the production process' and '[releasing] behind the scenes information' suggest unique content that will be likely to fulfill NLA's overall goal of encouraging 'stimulating conversation' amongst their followers.⁹ However, the majority of actual content consists of official production posters, re-tweets of positive audience reviews, and the occasional holiday greeting.¹⁰

Interestingly, this disparity reflects the ongoing debate about theatre companies use of social media, the nature of which is summarized by Lyn Gardner when she asserts that 'it's high time theatres used social media properly - and not just for free advertising'.¹¹ Put simply, the debate seems to divide social media content into two categories. Content may correspond either with a marketing- or artistic-led approach, in other words aiming to promote ticket sales, or the 'engagement...educated interpretation, conversation and critique [amongst followers]', respectively.¹² Seeing as Gardener pinpoints audience reviews on social networks (such as Twitter) as an increasing means by which ticket sales are driven, the ways in which companies interact with such reviews can arguably indicate the extent to which their Twitter account is primarily used as a platform for marketing.¹³ NLA's continual sharing of positive audience reviews corresponds with an approach that is criticised as heavily marketing-led, with scholars such as Heim expressing weariness over the fact that 'savvy theatre companies... immediately "retweet" some of the more complimentary comments to their followers'.¹⁴ In fact, criticisms seem to have become so prominent that companies such as Gecko Theatre have been fast to publish social media policies, assuring their followers that 'our social media is led by artists, not marketing professionals' and promising to 'retweet negative reviews of our work too'.¹⁵

The focus on profitableness connected to NLA's 'retweeting' of positive reviews is mirrored by their tendency to post 'generic' content (such as 'Happy New Year' wishes) over the type of content initially suggested in their Marketing strategies. Seeing as 'value [on social media] is not determined simply by the quality of posts...[but] is grounded in their reach'¹⁶, content that appeals to a wider audience is arguably emphasised due to its potential to attract 'new' followers. While NLA's techniques are thus understandable from a marketing perspective, they also draw attention to issues connected to theatre's perpetual quest for the 'new' audience. In order to encourage a focus on 'quality' over 'reach', it may therefore be useful for theatre venues to redefine the concept of a 'new' audience for social media. For example, if the definition of an audience member as 'new' was linked to a change in her 'horizon of expectations'¹⁷ instead of her previous presence or absence in the venue, social media's potential for the creation of unique and stimulating content would arguably increase in value.

⁹ Nottingham Lakeside Arts, *Inside out of Mind Marketing Plan*, given as a handout in Contemporary Performance Module (21 October 2015).

¹⁰ Nottingham Lakeside Arts, *Nottingham Lakeside*, (Twitter, [n.d]), <https://twitter.com/LakesideArts?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor> [accessed 19 December 2015].

¹¹ Lyn Gardner, 'Theatre: wake up to the digital age!', *The Guardian*, 20 April 2010, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2010/apr/18/theatre-digital-twitter-facebook-social-media>> [accessed 21 December 2015].

¹² Elizabeth Lynn McClelland, 'Tools of Engagement: The Potential of Theatre Web Sites for Fostering Active Audience Participation' (2011). *Master's Theses* (SJSU Scholar Works, 2011). Paper 4063, p. 66.

¹³ Gardener, 'Theatre: Wake up to the digital age!', 2010.

¹⁴ Caroline Louise Heim, *Audience as Performer: The changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the twenty-first Century*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 103.

¹⁵ Gecko Theatre, *Social Media Ideology*, (Gecko Theatre Company, [n.d]) <<http://geckotheatre.com/social-media-ideology/>> [accessed 19 December 2015].

¹⁶ Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Social Media*, (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 2.

¹⁷ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 229.

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Piece C: The Effect of Arts Council England Policies on Rural Touring: Pentabus Theatre Company and the Conceptualization of the 'Rural Audience'.

As part of our session with Tily Branson from New Perspectives Theatre Company, we watched short films that outlined the approach of different rural touring companies.¹⁸ Seeing as all films exhibited an unusual focus on the theatre audience itself, I have chosen to examine the manner in which it is represented. While I will focus on Pentabus Theatre Company, it is notable that their approach has many similarities to other companies.

In Pentabus' short film, the audience tends to be characterised primarily through their 'isolation' from theatre (e.g. as 'those with limited access to the arts', '[people who] might not have experienced this...before').¹⁹ In fact, the term 'audience' is not used, and the depiction of the community - portrayed through short interview clips in which audience members express their enthusiasm - is reminiscent more of a grateful receiver, than a paying audience. Further, in contrast to a conception of 'the audience' as simply a group of '[spectators] who surrender [their] individual status upon entering the auditorium'²⁰, the differences in age, ethnicity and gender of the interviewed audience members can be interpreted as an effort to highlight their diversity.

This representation may be partially explained by the fact that Pentabus is funded by the Arts Council England as part of their 'Creative Case for Diversity' scheme. In order to be funded, companies must develop work for audiences who are 'geographically isolated'²¹, as well as respond to issues of 'race, ethnicity, ...age [and] gender'²² in regard to their work and target audience. Apart from the close correlation between the ACE's aims and Pentabus' representation of their audience, Pentabus' remaining policies are arguably an attempt to 'tick the boxes' of the 'Creative Case for Diversity' criteria, an example being their 'green theatre practice'²³ policy as a response to the ACE's demand that arts be 'environmentally sustainable'²⁴. While this does not suggest that Pentabus' ideas were simply born to meet ACE criteria, their correlation draws attention to the influence government's larger goals regarding the Arts can have on (rural) theatre companies. With key words of companies becoming 'responsibility' and 'impact'²⁵, individuality may be stifled by the fact that companies 'have to package their projects in particular ways, [becoming] more about spin than substance'.²⁶

A further issue is that the emphasis on the cultural isolation of 'the rural audience' may perpetuate false assumptions of their 'backwardness', exemplified by the surprise expressed in statements such as 'it's amazing how adventurous and sophisticated those audiences are'.²⁷ In reality, communities are more likely to be 'decisively plural, conflicted, even contradictory', and individual audience member's experience of the Arts may differ greatly.²⁸ Thus, the conceptualization of 'the rural audience' as homogeneous and equally 'isolated from the arts' should be viewed with a critical awareness of artistic and political pressures connected to ACE funding.

¹⁸ National Rural Touring Forum, *What is Rural Touring?*, (National Rural Touring Forum, [n.d]) <<http://www.ruraltouring.org/work/what-is-rural-touring>> [accessed 26 December 2015].

¹⁹ Pentabus Theatre Company, *A short film about Pentabus Theatre Company*, online video recording, YouTube, 07 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkGe25_irHo> [accessed 23 December 2015].

²⁰ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 219.

²¹ Arts Council England, *Strategic Touring programme* (Arts Council England, [n.d]) <<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/apply-for-funding/strategic-touring-programme/>> [accessed 23 December 2015].

²² Arts Council England, *Investing in Diversity 2015-18* (Arts Council England, January 2015) <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/Investing_in_Diversity_2015-18_Jan2015.pdf> [accessed 02 January 2016].

²³ Pentabus Rural Theatre Company, *Our Policies*, (Pentabus Rural Theatre Company, [n.d]) <<http://www.pentabus.co.uk/our-policies>> [accessed 26 December 2015].

²⁴ Arts Council England, *National portfolio organisations funding programme - National equality analysis* (Arts Council England, August 2014) <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/NPO_EA_analysis_and_Appendix_A_August_2014.doc.pdf> [accessed 02 January 2016].

²⁵ Pentabus, *Our Policies* [accessed 26 December 2015].

²⁶ Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: a Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 213.

²⁷ Nell Frizzel, 'Guide to Rural Touring', *Ideas Tap Magazine*, 29 September 2011, <<http://www.ideastap.com/IdeasMag/the-knowledge/guide-to-rural-touring>> [accessed 23 December 2015].

²⁸ Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 12.

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Piece D: 'The virtual auditorium': A Critical Discussion of the Potential of 'online audiences' to Negotiate and Create Meaning.

During our discussion on reviewing theatre with John Stokes, John told us that many theatres and theatre companies use forums such as Twitter, Facebook, and their own websites to encourage audiences to share and exchange 'criticisms' online. Similar to the space of post-performance discussion, the audience is thus offered a forum in which meaning of the theatrical experience can be 'changed, shaped and re-articulated...for all those participating'.²⁹ While this suggests a rather fluid relationship between the offline and online world, it is useful to consider the extent to which the 'online' audience is in fact comparable to the 'physical' audience present at the performance. On the one hand, some may agree with Heim's conception of the online platform as a 'virtual auditorium' which simply represents a continuation of the performance text.³⁰ On the other hand, there are opposing conceptions that view online forums as something 'less' than theatre, arguing for example that 'art's energy depends on the...[close] relationship between artist and audience, articulated, sensed, and felt on *both sides*'.³¹

While it is true that online forums are unlikely to include an exchange between artist and audience, it is arguable that what a contemporary audience is able to 'articulate' during a performance has been drastically reduced over the course of theatre history, nowadays consisting of a contribution which scholars such as Kerschaw³² and Heim see as 'largely regulated to laughter and applause'.³³ Contrarily, the separation of digital spaces from the framework of the theatre space (the latter of which, according to Bennett, involves a 'social contract' that leads spectators to adopt 'passive roles'³⁴) arguably leads to the audience's liberation from such limited contribution. Rather than conforming to a 'homogeneity of response'³⁵, audience members verbalise and discuss their individual responses to the production. Encompassing not only evaluations of the overall quality of the production, but also complex aesthetic discussions, the online space can even be seen as encouraging the 'passion for argument' which Brecht desired to provoke in his audience.³⁶

All in all, then, theatres and theatre companies seem to have recognized the potential of online forums as enabling a form of audience exchange different to that of the theatre space. Amongst other things, the steadily growing digitalisation of audience response can be seen as empowering the audience in terms of its ability to co-create the meaning of productions, and previous claims such as the fact that 'comments made between groups while leaving the theatre...[cannot] directly inform the theatrical event' are in a way revoked.³⁷ However, it is notable that one will never be able to equate online forums with those audience responses that arise during, or immediately after, a performance. Rather, considering the fact that online content will be influenced by many extra-theatrical elements such as the 'etiquette' of digital forums, the awareness of a large online audience, or the period of time that passes between the theatrical event and the moment of online verbalization, the voices of 'digital audiences' must be analysed through an unique framework.

²⁹ Caroline Louise Heim, "'Argue with us!": Audience co-creation through post-performance discussions', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 28 (2012), 89-197 (p. 92) .

³⁰ Heim, 'Argue with us!', p. 103.

³¹ Francois Matarasso and Rosie Redzia, *A Wider Horizon* (Wyomdham: Creative Arts East, 2014)

<<https://regularmarvels.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/rm5-a-wider-horizon.pdf>> [accessed 02 January 2016] (24).

³² Baz Kerschaw, 'Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in Twentieth-Century Theatre', *Modern Drama*, 44:2 (2001), 113-154.

³³ Heim, 'Argue with us!', p. 1.

³⁴ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A theory of production and reception* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (London: Bloomsbury, 1965), p. 11.

³⁷ Russel Keat, Whiteley Nigel and Nicholas Abercrombie, eds., *The Authority of the Consumer* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.

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