

Feeling Performance, Remembering Trauma

Patrick Duggan (University of Leeds)

Maybe bodies come to be “ours” when we recognise them as traumatic (Phelan 18)

Trauma we are told is a perpetual present, resilient in its persistence and timeless occupation of a subject who does not and cannot know it. It happened but I do not know it – that it happened or what it was that happened. Yet this happening is not past since it knows no release from its present because it is not yet known: never known, never forgotten, not yet remembered. (Pollock)

Both Phelan and Pollock, somewhat differently, articulate the ever-presence of the traumatic event and the difficulty of recognising/understanding that event. Traumatic events have long been the focus of attempted representation in the theatre. Since the ancient Greeks, theatre has been concerned with the representation and resolution of trauma (principally through classic tragic modes); trauma is an evocative and emotive force that binds an audience to the theatrical action drawing them ever deeper into the performance event. That trauma pervades the survivor’s life is not in question, but before entering into a discussion concerning the nature of traumatic representation and “presence” in the theatre it is important to briefly track the history of a theory which, much like its subject matter, is becoming increasingly pervasive within the academy, and especially in the arts.

Historically, trauma has been associated with physical injury, studied and treated by doctors and surgeons. It was not until towards the end of the nineteenth century, after a sustained period of development in “creative psychological theorizing” as Micale puts it (115), that the conception of trauma began to be reconfigured within psychopathology and its definition started to shift from physical blow towards that of a shocking event, the impact of which is felt within the nerves and mind of the survivor. This period developed the foundations on which modern understandings of

psychoanalysis/psychotherapy, psychology, and psychiatry are built. While trauma has been redefined and reconsidered over many decades, there is still no single definition and understanding of it; however, one of the most succinct and useful definitions of trauma in its psychological rather than physio-medical understandings is from Cathy Caruth. She defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). It is important, here, to highlight that while the return of the event is an imagined re-living (or remembering) it is nonetheless a powerfully visceral experience that the survivor embodies; it seems to be happening again, so to speak.

Dominic LaCapra, in a widely supported argument, has proffered that traumatic events numb the senses to the moment of impact and therefore they cannot be registered at the time of their occurrence. It is only after a period of latency that the impact of the event is felt (174). There is no objective viewing of the incident in the moment of its happening, it is only afterwards in its “endless impact on a life” (Caruth 7), that we come to understand the original moment as the beginning of the trauma. It is an event which happens too unexpectedly and with such immediacy that it cannot be fully comprehended as it is happening. Biologically speaking, our “fight or flight” instinct takes over in these moments of unimaginable difficulty. As Brown very succinctly puts it, trauma is “an event outside the range of human experience” (100). We have no field of reference within which to understand it as it happens; our bodies are only concerned with surviving the event rather than understanding it.

In her musings on loss and (its) “survival” in the introduction to *Mourning Sex*, Peggy Phelan touches on trauma as already existent within human kind from the moment of birth, her language evoking a sense of evisceration at birth as we are

“severed from the placenta and cast from the womb” only to enter the world as “amputated” bodies defined by our own mortality (5). During these opening pages she postulates that “trauma is untouchable [...] it cannot be represented. The symbolic cannot carry it: trauma makes a tear in the symbolic network itself” (5) – trauma, in other words, is beyond representation. This is not to deny the possibility that traumatic memories can be triggered through the witnessing of representations which, in themselves, may be read or received as “traumatic;” while specific traumas, on an individual level, may be outside the scope of representational forms we do have access to presenting images, action and language which may be considered generically “traumatic” in the experiencing of them.

Judith Herman asserts that,

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. (51)

Trauma causes a shudder in the make-up of the victim’s understanding of themselves and the world in which they move, making them question their understanding of the ordering of life. In his examination of “post-dramatic” theatre, and quite separately from trauma theory discourses, Hans-Thies Lehmann elucidates a similar argument for performance claiming that it “has the power to question and destabilise the spectator’s construction of identity” (5). This striking echo of Herman’s assertion that traumatic events “shatter the construction of self” is particularly interesting as it allows us to begin to plot the line between performance and trauma: both share a destabilising power so it would seem that theatre, more than any other art form, is perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with, if not a representation of, trauma.

Malpede further clarifies this argument suggesting that “[b]ecause theatre takes place in public and involves the movement of bodies across a stage, theatre seems uniquely suited to portray the complex interpersonal [and intrapersonal] realities of trauma” (168).

Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* self consciously attempts to bear witness to and portray the traumas of war, rape, domestic violence and loss. Using the Bosnian conflict of the early 1990s as a central inspiration, Kane wrote a play that so graphically depicts and describes multiple acts of violence that its original staging in 1995 was met with almost unanimous vitriolic condemnation in the nation’s press. The reaction surrounding this performance and the abundance of critical attention it received indicates that there was something in the experience of being at the performance that caught the nation’s collective attention; even the tabloids picked up on this “feast of filth,” as Jack Tinker infamously put it (5). *Blasted* grabbed attention in a society where representations of violence were becoming normalised, it presented violence and trauma in too “real,” too embodied, a way for the British public to ignore.

The play articulates the way in which traumas tear the fabric of peoples’ lives without reason or warning:

It was about violence, about rape, and it was about these things happening between people who know each other and ostensibly love each other... suddenly, violently, without any warning, people’s lives are completely ripped to pieces. (Kane qtd in Sierz 101-102)

The repetitive and cyclical nature of trauma is a central thread throughout the play: perpetrators have the traumas they have committed turned upon themselves (for example, the Soldier rapes Ian after Ian has raped Cate); Ian and Cate’s very relationship is a perpetual cycle of wounding and re-wounding which neither can escape; the pain of survival is revisited upon Ian *ad infinitum* at the end of the play,

left alive he has no choice but to revisit and relive the traumas he has experienced as both perpetrator and victim – as Annabelle Singer says, “He can’t even die” (140).

Darkness.

Light.

IAN masturbating.

IAN: cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt

Darkness.

Light.

IAN strangling himself.

Darkness.

Light.

IAN shitting.

And then trying to clean it up with newspaper.

Darkness.

Light.

IAN laughing hysterically.

Darkness.

Light.

IAN having a nightmare.

Darkness.

Light.

IAN crying, huge bloody tears.

He is hugging the Soldier’s body for comfort.

Darkness.

Light.

IAN lying very still, weak with hunger.

Darkness.

Light.

IAN tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the boards and lifts the baby’s body out.

He eats the baby.

He puts the sheet the baby was wrapped in back in the hole.

A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor.

He dies with relief.

It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof.

Eventually.

IAN: Shit. (Kane 59-60)

Dramaturgically, *Blasted* bombards its audience with image after image of horror and trauma, both in its action and language, it quite literally blasts them into confronting numerous traumatic events; it is an attempt to portray and bear witness to the power and intricacies of inter- and intra- personal traumas.

I have seen two productions of *Blasted*; the first was in Warwick Arts Centre's studio theatre in late 2000, directed by Russell Whitehead. The production was both visceral and experiential, holding true to the *mise-en-scène* that had defined the original. This was in part due to some excellent acting and to the director's unwaveringly detailed staging of the violence in the piece. No quarter was given; not once did the actors shy away from the action and the audience was constantly drawn into the harrowing world presented on stage. One element of this production that remains clearest as I recall it was the feeling of claustrophobia in the studio, a feeling that engulfed the audience giving the production a sense of relentlessness and a viscerally experiential quality. While the studio is a fairly large space it has the adaptability to be closed in on its audience, the action brought forward to the point where auditorium and stage seem one and the same space. The proximity to the performers enabled the audience to hear their bodies collide together and to more easily connect to the physical exertions of some the most violent scenes. There was a palpable tension amongst the audience and audible gasps gave a sense of collectively feeling the action; much of it was, as it must have been in the tiny Theatre Upstairs in 1995, too close for comfort, too "real." This was a performance defined by its attempts to represent the realities of traumatic experience and I felt the violence of it hammer through my body.

In July 2005 I saw Thomas Ostermeier's production of *Blasted (Anéantis)* at the Avignon Festival. In its scale alone this production was the opposite of Whitehead's; the scenography was fabulously detailed, to the point that when the hotel is "blasted by a mortar bomb" (Kane 39) rubble quite literally exploded over the stage as the room crumbled. Ostermeier's direction was masterfully understated, moving away from the brutality of the violent acts to focus on the language and

subtleties of the characters' relationships. Yet, while this production was moving and powerful in its own way there was something missing from a play which, even in reading it, packs a significant punch. This was partly to do with direction of the text but this was not significantly radical to deny the visceral nature of the violence in the piece, Ian still forced himself on Cate, was still raped by the Soldier and had his eyes sucked out. The impact was lost not in the interpretation but more by the fact that the audience was so far removed from the action and the performers. The play was staged in the roofless ruins of a cavernous old church, denying the audience any sense of intimacy with the performance and even in the second row, as I was, the stage was some considerable distance away. Gone were the sounds of bodies under exertion, the sense of collective experience and the feeling of reality so palpable in the Warwick production.¹

These two productions varied greatly in their interpretation of the play; both were effective and interesting for different reasons but only the first held any sense of the felt/embodied "experience" Kane suggests she was looking for when she wrote the piece (Kane qtd in Sierz 98). The performance dynamic and the establishment of a kinaesthetic connection between the audience and performers, it would appear from these examples, is central to an embodied and experiential reception of the performance, and, as I will discuss shortly, to the visceral experience of traumatic memory.

On 7 April 2007 I had the unsettling and moving "pleasure" of going to see Kira O'Reilly's performance *Untitled (Syncope)*, at the Shunt Vaults, as part of the

¹ The only exception to this was during the final moments of the production when I finally felt the weight of the play. While the "trauma" of the action had had little experiential impact the loneliness and relentless despair of Ian's failure to die, the trauma of his living, hung in the air. During these moments there was a stillness in the audience that seemed to signal a shared empathy for Ian, a desire for relief from the grind of life.

SPILL Festival 2007. It was one of the clearest experiences of kinaesthetically embodying a performance I have had, not only because I felt a connection to the body of the artist but also because I was physically moved (both around the space and in my muscular reaction to the performance). Before the performance proper begins, the audience is led through the damp, musty and dark labyrinth of arches and chambers that makes up the Shunt Vaults until we are standing at one end of the main concourse, staring into the blackness at the other end. Looking through the sequential railway arches into the darkness I am struck by the stillness and silence of the audience; there is an aura of reverence and anticipation amongst my fellow spectators that I assume is due both to the knowledge, amongst some, of O'Reilly's previous work and in part to the surroundings.

I suddenly see something move. There is a figure moving slowly towards us; she is naked, walking backwards. I think I see a baby looking over her shoulder towards us. As she gets closer I see she is wearing a burlesque "showgirl" headdress and bright red high heels, which we can now hear clipping the floor. I realise the face looking at us is not that of a baby but the artist's face reflected in a small circular mirror, she is watching us watch her. When she is only about five metres away a slow knocking sound begins, it is somewhere between a clock ticking and a hammer hitting a block of wood. I cannot locate its source. As the woman draws ever closer the audience position themselves in a horse shoe shape around her. She is so close it is possible to see every contour and muscle in her body.

Her skin is littered with the traces of past wounds, small, neat scars all over her body from ankle to neck. She now stands amongst the audience, catching our gaze in the mirror. She holds my eye for what seems like an age, I notice her crimson lipstick mirroring the colour of her shoes, and then her eyes move past mine around

the semi-circle and back again. Her gaze returns to mine, she reaches out and takes my hand leading me away from the rest of the audience. My heart quickens as the security blanket of being part of the group evaporates and I am suddenly aware of their gaze on my back. I feel very alone and exposed. I notice the scalpel she clamps to the face of the mirror; it looks like a sinister clock. I am led through two arches into one of the chambers, the audience following. And then I am released.

The woman places the mirror on the floor, the scalpel now in full view. She stands straight, raises her right arm above her head, points two fingers to the sky and breaths in. She breaths in and in and in and in. There is no exhalation. The sound changes to a faster clicking, like a metronome counting out the beats of her inhalations and movements. Her elongated body starts to tremble under the strain of her breathing, her face reddens, her abdominal muscles contract and some of the scars on her body seem to flash angrily. Her body suddenly relaxes, her arm drops and her muscles go limp as she finally breaths out. She repeats this process, once more with her right arm raised but this time only exhaling, out and out and out and out. And then twice more (one in, one out) with her left arm raised. With each repetition her muscles tense more, the veins in her neck bulge and her body shakes under the strain. She goes limp as she finally exhales after the fourth action.

After a moment's rest she steps forward, picks up the scalpel, stretches down to her right calf and cuts. She turns to her left calf next where I have a clearer line of sight, as she stretches the skin on her calf I see the purple trace of a previous cut. Unconsciously I tense my calf muscles, half expecting to feel the impending incision myself. In an action that echoes the cyclical/repetitive nature of traumatic experience, she draws the blade along the purple scar line, slicing into her flesh and reopening the three inch wound. Blood oozes out slowly and as it collects along the cut it tumbles

down towards her ankle puddling between the skin of her foot and the edge of her red shoe.

These opening moments give way to a series of repetitive, strenuous and visceral movements, her body (and ours) in perpetual motion through the space. The metronome's pace quickens and grows louder as she tries to keep her taught automaton style movements up with the pace set by the mechanical ticking, all the while teetering in her high heels. She never speaks.

Throughout the forty minute performance I could not help but think back to the glances and touch I shared with the artist. The experience of physically being led away from the audience group circled in my mind constantly, the sense of her hand on mine palpable throughout. The performance was both beautiful and incredibly difficult to be part of; I found myself desperate to watch and desperate to hide at the same time. For me the experience was a deeply visceral and connected one, I very clearly felt the musculature of my own body and its relation to the performer's physicality. And while this was a very individual experience, the audience as a whole was made to move around the space, we were directed and manipulated by the performer's movement through the arches and tunnels of the vaults, constantly jostling for a better viewpoint and occasionally finding ourselves bumping into each other and the ever moving performer. We were a community of individual spectators, physically in motion with the performer and within touching distance of her every movement.

This was, as Anna Fenemore has termed it, a "visceral-visual performance" (110). The performance space was shared, unbounded, desegregated and through this there was the possibility of generating a sense of being more fully present at the performance. The performance was received through the body/ies of the audience; the

performance dynamic was such that the audience was unlikely to be engaged in a process of self objectification/elimination or distancing from the performance and so might more fully experience the performance and ourselves within in it. The experience of watching someone willingly slice into their flesh connected on a bodily level in the anticipation of pain I expected to feel, a sensation that was undeniably shared by others in the audience as they variously winced, gasped, tensed muscles, or looked away holding hands to mouths. I felt strangely culpable, as though I should have stopped her. I became, as Hand and Wilson put it in their examination of the theatre of Grand-Guignol, a “willing witness.”²

It is the physical connection between bodies in a space that gives any theatrical experience its power; being part of the live event, watching bodies move in front of you, places you in a direct corporeal/phenomenological relationship with the performers and with the representations/images being presented in the piece. Stanton B. Garner argues that the experience of the theatre is registered through the body, that “[t]he embodied *I* of theatrical spectatorship is grounded, one might say, in an embodied *eye*” (4). Theatre’s capacity to question constructions of self is bound to the live nature of the event and the kinaesthetic connection between bodies in a shared space, making it the ideal site for traumatic exploration. Shepherd asserts that, “effects are produced in the spectator simply as a result of materially sharing the space with the performance. Many of these effects, bypassing the intellect, are felt in the body and work powerfully to shape a spectator’s sense of the performance” and therefore “[t]here is a kinaesthetic empathy between the spectators’ musculature and the performers” (36-37; 46). Both Shepherd and Garner point towards the unique quality of theatre/performance as a *felt* experience, an experience in which we are viscerally

² “By a simple acknowledgement of the audience ... [they] become accessories to the act and, most critically, willing witnesses” (Hand 36).

connected to the work presented to us. But, as the above examples suggest, in order to be kinaesthetically connected to the performance, to truly feel the experience, we need, especially when thinking about the reception/remembering of traumatic experience, to be close enough to the action that we can palpably feel the movements and hear the sounds of the performer's body. In such a situation, unlike film or painting (or even the Avignon production of *Blasted*), the audience is not removed from the action by a screen or canvas (or distance), we can hear, see, touch and even smell the performers; this connection places us in a frame of both responsibility for, and complicity in, the action. It seems to me that this is especially true of work in which we are not positioned in a darkened auditorium in comfy seats where we can convince ourselves that we are simply individual spectators. In all of the productions where I have had a more fully embodied experience of the performance, be it "traumatic" or not, I have also had a sense of the community of the audience, a sense that while it is a subjective and individual experience there is a body of spectators engaged in a similar encounter.

As I have already noted, trauma is, to use the Lacanian term, beyond the symbolic. But traumatic remembering can be triggered and engaged through performance. For me the process of remembering is most apparent when encountering a sense of experiential spectatorship, such as the experience I had at *Untitled (Syncope)*. Central to the re-living/remembering of traumatic memory is the establishment of a performance dynamic which is physically engaging for the audience. It seems to me that while plays such as *Blasted*, and many others too numerous to analyse here, can engage their audience experientially crucially it is through a connection to the action rather than the language that a felt quality of the performance can be stimulated. Traumatic events may be beyond the symbolic,

especially language, but through a kinaesthetic empathy with the bodies of the performers an embodied and experiential experience of performance can give the effect of trauma's presence.

By constantly drawing the audience through the space, O'Reilly created a kinaesthetic bond between performer and audience, a bond which was both physically and emotionally experienced. The connection I felt to Kira O'Reilly's body kept drawing me to make associations in my memory, it put me in a space where I began to reconnect with past moments of traumatic experience – my first memory of pain, the image of watching a friend's forehead split open on a curb, and the sickening experience of guilt and helplessness when a loved one tried to commit suicide. I did not want to remember. The performance placed me in a position of remembering and re-experiencing my own personal traumas. It is in this kinaesthetic/visceral connection between performer and audience member, between body A and body B, that theatre/performance connects with trauma and where it has the capacity to act as a catalyst to re-embodiment traumatic experience, or, returning to Lehmann, to destabilise our constructions of identity and place within the world in which we move (5).

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