'Everything has a fucking value': Negative Dialectics in the Work of Back to Back Theatre

Introduction

Back to Back's *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* (2011) consolidated the company's reputation as an ensemble of international standing, following acclaimed earlier tours of *small metal objects* (2005) and *Food Court* (2008). As Jane Goodall observes, members of the company's acting ensemble 'share the outsider experience of being excluded from the norm through being perceived as people with a disability. They know what it is to live with the burden of a category identity'.[1] For Bryoni Tresize and Caroline Wake, this 'emphasis on *perceived* disability destabilizes the binary between ability and disability and signals an interest in the visual and cultural construction of these categories'.[2]

Yoni Prior, drawing on an unpublished interview with Artistic Director Bruce Gladwin, comments that this also 'addresses a contradiction in the way that the company is seen. The company works with artists with formal diagnoses of intellectual disability, but the work they make is 'so intelligent'.[3] This engagement with contradiction is characteristic of the company's work, and in this article I will offer a dialectical reading of its productions which uncovers contradictions within perceptions of learning disability, and the ensemble's own critical perceptions of the world. Taking Adorno's theory of negative dialectics as a framework, my analysis is indebted to but also contests the Hegelian dialectic. For Adorno, the contradictory moment of the

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[1] Jane Goodall, 'Preface' in *'We're People Who Do Shows': Back to Back Theatre, Performance, Politics, Visibility*, ed. by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2013), pp. 5-7 (p. 5)

[2] Bryoni Tresize and Caroline Wake, 'Disabling Spectacle: Curiosity, contempt and collapse in performance theatre' in *'We're People Who Do Shows'* ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 119-130 (p. 120); emphasis in original

[3] Yoni Prior, '"Scott's aired a couple of things": Back to Back Theatre rehearse Ganesh Versus the Third Reich' in *'We're People Who Do Shows'* ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 209-217 (p. 217)

antithesis in Hegel's model must not be resolved through a seemingly progressive synthesis, as this necessarily overlooks the object's ongoing resistance to being readily conceptualised.

This is illustrated in the discussion above through the ways that the learning disabled performer contradicts the 'category identity' of intellectual impairment. To subsume the performer easily under this concept would be an instance of what Adorno calls identity-thinking, in which the object is wholly determined by the abstract concept applied to it, at the expense of its contradictory, material complexity. Hegelian dialectics pursues such identity-thinking, while Adorno's negative dialectics is grounded in a recognition that the object persistently eludes complete classification. Thus, as David Barnett notes, Adorno 'heralds an uncomfortable, awkward dialectic, which does not move effortlessly from synthesis to synthesis but accrues contradiction upon contradiction […] [T]he dialectic becomes an unwieldy beast alive with contradiction and not harmony'.[4]

Brian O'Connor observes that negative dialectics is not, therefore, the contemplative activity of a determining subject but is provoked by the subject's reciprocal encounter with a resistant object, which 'entails that experience has a nonidentical moment in which the irreducible particularity of the object (and not just our concept of it) is a significant or meaningful element of the experience'.[5] In the discussion below, the dialectic refers to these principles of negative dialectics through which performance opens up multiple unresolved contradictions, confronting both actors and spectators

[4] David Barnett, 'Performing Dialectics in an Age of Uncertainty, or: Why Post-Brechtian ≠ Postdramatic' in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama), pp. 47-66
[5] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), p.46

with discrepancies between experience in the material world and conceptual understanding of it.

The analysis attends to the formal as well as thematic constructions of Back to Back's work, and also the discourses that surround the company. Taking an overview of the three productions mentioned above, the discussion acknowledges the wider contradictions that emerge through intertextuality and the perception of the ensemble as a social entity beyond its artistic output, while opening up the ensemble's engagements with wide-ranging social and ideological concerns. This begins with, and ultimately returns to, the 'freak porn' moment of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* in order to attend dialectically to vital yet unnoticed contradictions running through the relationships between actors, audience and event.

The 'freak porn' moment

Ganesh Versus the Third Reich unfolds two narratives: the epic fantasy of the title in which Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu God, journeys to wartime Berlin to confront Hitler and reclaim the swastika; and a series of metatheatrical episodes in which incidents, improvisations and arguments from the making process are seemingly re-enacted. While these rehearsed re-enactments imply verbatim precision, they are carefully shaped and edited by Bruce Gladwin. Four performers from the company's ensemble (Mark Deans, Simon Laherty, Scott Price and Brian Tilley), appear in the production alongside an associate, non-disabled artist, David Woods. The actors play a range of characters as part of the epic fantasy, as well as performing 'avatars of themselves' in the metatheatrical scenes, producing a space for contradiction between the avatar, as a refined and edited projection of the actor, and the real performer who remains materially present behind the self-

representation.[6] Moreover, like the metatheatrical re-enactments, these avatars are not wholly faithful reconstructions as the actors acquire lines, actions and perspectives that originally belonged to different ensemble members.[7]

In one episode, the avatars debate the ethics of representation, a central theme of the performance. The subject of the discussion is ensemble member Mark, provisionally cast as Adolf Hitler. Claiming that Mark has difficulty distinguishing fact from fiction, Scott insists that the casting compromises the artistic and ethical integrity of the project, an especially sensitive dilemma given the production's treatment of the Holocaust. David, in the role of the actor-director, offers a counter argument, suggesting that Mark's performance in the role has potential as an 'exciting, dramatic moment' precisely because of the ethical tensions. He demonstrates such a moment by indicting the 'empty seats' of the show's future audience:

> DAVID: Like this person sitting here, this person sitting here. You are a pervert. You have come here because you want to see a bit of freak porn.[8]

This sudden turn to the audience effects a structural shock, cutting through the fourth wall security of the metatheatrical scenes to focus an incriminating gaze on the startled spectators, with the 'freak porn' allegation suggesting that they are secretly exploiting the actors' disabilities for their own voyeuristic pleasure. The affective power of this unexpected and accusatory turn to the audience has made the 'freak porn' moment a recurring reference point in critical analyses of Back to Back's work.

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[6] Richard Gough, 'An interview with Bruce Gladwin', in *'We're People Who Do Shows'* ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 231-257 (p. 250)

[7] Throughout the analysis, I will use the actors' surnames for general reference and their first names when referring to the avatars of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*.

[8] 'Ganesh Versus the Third Reich Script' in *'We're People Who Do Shows'* ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 159-194 (p. 184)

In a recent edited volume about the company,[9] it is prominently discussed in all three chapters devoted to *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*.

In each of these analyses, the moment frames the performance from within by exposing apparently latent attitudes towards the intellectual disabilities of the actors. For Anna Teresa Scheer, the 'alarming accusation' implicates the audience by connecting them to 'the historical context of the normative gaze turned towards the examination of people designated as freaks'.[10] Yoni Prior experiences a more aggressive confrontation with this gaze, observing that the 'work glares back, remorselessly demanding an apologia from its audience, asking, 'What are you looking at?'.[11] This challenge provokes a frustrating reflection, in Helena Grehan's view, in which the audience is 'accused of consuming this spectacle [...] without engaging in our own ethical reflection about how it is that we attempt to judge this work', revealing 'the flawed parameters on which we may respond to work by actors who society perceives to have a disability'.[12]

The 'freak porn' moment thus ruptures a carefully woven and intricate dramaturgical structure that mediates a real encounter between spectators and actors lurking behind the enacted narratives. Operative here is a postdramatically astute model of spectatorship in which '[t]he central theatrical sign, the actor's body, refuses to serve signification'.[13] More specifically, the analyses are alert to 'the presence of the *deviant body*, which through illness, disability or deformation deviates from the norm

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[9] Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall, eds., *'We're People Who Do Shows': Back to Back Theatre, Performance, Politics, Visibility* (Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2013)

[10] Anna Teresa Scheer, 'The Impossible Fairytale, or Resistance to the Real' in *'We're People Who Do Shows'* ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 218-226 (p. 222)

[11] Prior, '"Scott's aired a couple of things" pp. 209-217 (p. 217)

[12] Helena Grehan, 'Irony, Satire and Parody in Ganesh Versus the Third Reich' in *'We're People Who Do Shows'* ed. by Grehan and Eckersall, pp. 197-207 (pp. 204-205)

[13] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 95

and causes an 'amoral' fascination, unease or fear'.[14] David's accusation that the spectators 'want to see a bit of freak porn' induces a startling apperception in which they find themselves seemingly caught in the act of covertly indulging such amoral fascination. Lehmann notes, however, that a postdramatic aesthetic offers a resistance to the 'tight entanglement of drama and dialectic'.[15]

Significantly, the 'freak porn' moment is effected through a conventionally Brechtian device as David renounces the fourth wall. Lehmann comments that it is difficult to 'separate out the "operative" inventions by Brecht from the conventions of the *theatre of stories* (*Fabel-Theater*) which he still took for granted but which the new theatre breaks away from'.[16] Yet, in some ways, *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* can be seen as extending the dramatic tradition by committing to two inter-relating stories. David Barnett's distinction between the postdramatic and the post-Brechtian is valuable here.[17] The *fabel* is not simply the narrative-structure of the play but an 'overarching interpretation of events' which offers 'an account of a play's action from a dialectical point of view'.[18] Thus, for Barnett, it is not the dramatic structure that establishes the context of Brechtian devices but their dialectical motivation. Accordingly, he distinguishes post-Brechtian theatre from postdramatic theatre on the grounds that the former maintains a tight entanglement with dialectics.

Back to Back's pursuit of the *fabel* both continues and moves beyond a Brechtian tradition, in that it is compelled to aim for an overarching understanding, yet is inevitably frustrated in its attempts to achieve this. The company can be understood as deviating from Brechtian practice at the same point at which Adorno deviates from

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[14] Ibid.; emphasis in original
[15] Ibid., p. 39
[16] Ibid., p. 33; emphasis in original
[17] See Barnett, 'Performing Dialectics'
[18] David Barnett, *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.86

Hegel. Alison Stone comments that 'following Hegel, Adorno maintains that whenever I grasp an object as non-identical with the concept(s) under which I have approached it, I become compelled to revise my concept(s) so as to try again to know, to classify, the elusive object'.[19] If this compulsion to overcome contradictions gives rise to the Hegelian synthesis, Adorno alternatively proposes 'letting them remain different, juxtaposed as such, without subsuming them under any unifying structure'.[20] Insofar as the Brechtian *fabel* offers a unifying structure by making all contradictions of the narrative internal to itself, the post-Brechtian *fabel* in Back to Back's work is opened out to, and destabilised by, its context. In *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, for example, the two interweaving *fabels* exacerbate rather than complement each other, as I shall discuss later.

Similarly, in the 'freak porn' moment, the turn to the audience does not provoke Brechtian critical distance but implicates the spectators in the event, producing the unresolved tension of negative dialectics. For Grehan, the spectators are alerted to their own guilt such that 'the feeling is one of shame [...] and an emotional reaction as if we have just been punched or slapped'.[21] Through this movement, spectatorship itself becomes petrified: 'We don't want to be bad spectators; instead we want some idea of what it is we should have been doing. There is no resolution [...] As spectators we long for something else but there is no reprieve'.[22]

The post-Brechtian act of direct address that produces such discomfort subjects the spectator to a troubling division. David's accusation, levelled at imaginary spectators of the future, is directed towards *the idea* of an audience motivated by passive

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[19] Alison Stone, 'Adorno, Hegel and Dialectic' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 6 (2014), pp.1118-1141 (p. 1135)
[20] Ibid., p. 1130
[21] Grehan, *Irony*, p. 205
[22] Ibid., p. 206

voyeurism. He effectively anticipates the audience as a homogenous mass, assuming a 'category identity' in which spectators are universally conceptualised as purveyors of 'freak porn'. Such a conceptualisation is unlikely to apply readily to the particular audiences that attend Back to Back's work. Yet by accepting the powerful charge of amoral fascination – as the critical analyses above appear to – audience members assume and experience the guilt that belongs to the imaginary spectator along with their own frustrated longing for a reprieve from this shame. Consequently, at the core of the 'freak porn' moment is the spectators' own construction as avatars, suspended between projected and actual versions of themselves. Thus, the spectator is exposed to the same dialectical tensions between an imposed category identity and its contradictory subjective reality that underpins the company's own dialectical exploration of learning disability.

'These types of people'

One of the provocative starting points for *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* was a post-show discussion for *Food Court*, a production in which all of the theatre performers are members of Back to Back's ensemble of actors perceived to have learning disabilities. A richly stylized production, *Food Court* depicts a brutal verbal and physical assault on a young woman (played by Sarah Mainwaring) by two other women (variously played by Rita Halabarec, Nicki Holland and Sonia Teuben). These violent episodes are interspersed with unsettling monologues from Scott Price and Mark Deans's performance of stage managerial activities. The nightmarish aesthetic eschews any sense of naturalism, employing stichomythic dialogue and Shakespearean verse, projections of the script, a dark, fairy-tale setting and improvised musical accompaniment by non-disabled jazz-trio The Necks.

Bruce Gladwin recalls that at one post-show discussion, the performance provoked questions about the actors' degree of empowerment and ownership as makers of devised theatre:

> someone stood up and said, 'You know, I don't believe these actors are capable of doing this and I know these types of people and there's no way they could make a work like this'.[23]

Discounting any material evidence or counter-claims, the protester maintains an absolute identification between the performers and a concept of learning disability that renders 'these types of people' incapable of decisive or controlling action within the making process. This observes a rigid binary classification which distinguishes people without learning disabilities from people with learning disabilities along the respective oppositions of capacity and incapacity, controlling and controlled, agency and powerlessness, and active and passive.

The metatheatrical narrative of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* seeks to contest such categorical perceptions by unfolding the complexities of a group-devising process in which 'someone suggests something and then someone bounces off and another person bounces off that and then, in retrospect, to claim some ownership, lineage or authority of ideas is fraught'.[24] As such, it counters the protester's fixed conceptualisations and invokes Adorno's prescription that contradiction 'indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived'.[25] If the 'freak porn' moment destabilises the spectators' capacity to judge the work of learning disabled actors, it does so as part of this wider dialectical exploration of the concept of intellectual disability.

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[23] Gough, 'Interview', p. 246
[24] Ibid., p. 251
[25] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 5

In his analysis of *Food Court*, Theron Schmidt argues that there are three competing modes of producing (and, I would add by extension, receiving) the learning disabled actor.[26] The first is as an iconic representation of disability itself, an abstract model which transcends individual particularity. This suggests something of a corrective to Lehmann, implying that the disabled body does not refuse signification as it always inherently signifies the external concept of disability. The second mode foregrounds the particular individuality of the performer as an act of resistance to the restrictive conceptualisations of disability.

Schmidt's third option 'is to produce the performers precisely *as* actors, neither identifiable as themselves, nor as an abstraction, but occupying a specific and contingent representational function within a framework of appearance'.[27] Re-perceiving learning disabled performers under the category of actor highlights 'not the actor's productivity or stubborn non-productivity, but the economy of production itself'.[28] This simple act of reclassification may offer some respite for the arrested spectators of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, alleviating their guilt through the recognition that they are merely caught up in a framework of appearance. Actors and audience are both exploited as necessary functions of a theatre economy which is contingent on the freakishness of performers and the voyeurism of spectators.

Substituting one point of identification for another in this way retains a sense of Hegelian idealism in which the classification of the object is determined by the viewing subject. For Adorno, however, subjective understanding must always be initiated by the object itself. As O'Connor explains, to 'experience fully – that is, to

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[26] See Theron Schmidt, 'Acting, Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and the Politics of Appearance' in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* ed. by Jürs-Munby, Carroll and Giles, pp. 189-207 (pp. 204-205)
[27] Ibid., p. 205; emphasis in original
[28] Ibid.

recognize one's experience as a process of subject-object reciprocity – would

involve the subject relating to a particular without reducing it, or reifying it, by means

of a preconceived concept of what the particular must be'.[29] Schmidt's approach

pursues a non-dialectical operation, maintaining the alternative categories by

manoeuvring around rather than working through the contradictions between them.

Negative dialectics, by contrast, proposes that the learning disabled actor can be

most understood only within the spectator's particular experience of performance,

and the contradictions provoked by this encounter with the object.

Gladwin notes that Mark Deans's appearance, which forms the opening action of

Food Court, produces another crisis of spectatorship:

> where audience is going, 'There's a guy with Down's syndrome. I wonder if
> he's playing a person with Down's syndrome?' I think that's a tension that the
> audience is never released from.[30]

This anxiety acknowledges an irreconcilable conflict between the concepts of actor

and learning disability. The actor, concerned with the dramatic representation of

character, is expected to possess mimetic flexibility, while learning disability is

understood as a fixture of identity which constrains mimetic prowess. This, in turn,

complicates the relationship between learning disability and individuality, as

intellectual impairment becomes perceived as the substance of identity, confusing it

with the actor's own character. In that reading, it determines, rather than obscures,

the individual.

Back to Back encourage rather than resolve such tensions, refusing to clarify

whether we are watching an actor, an individual or a disabled person. Deans's

opening action in *Food Court* involves setting the scene silently as, described by

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[29] O'Connor, *Adorno's Dialectic*, p. 47
[30] Bruce Gladwin, cited in Schmidt, 'Acting, Disabled', p. 197

Tresize and Wake, he 'places a chair on the stage and then walks to scrape a piece of masking tape off the floor, crossing back to place the tape at the chair's foot […] The moment is not singular, stable or for that matter, entirely readable; it holds the audience in a state of flux, unsure of who or what they are seeing'.[31] Alongside our confusion about whether the person before us represents someone with Down's syndrome or not, it is unclear whether Deans is playing the stage manager or whether he is, in actual fact, the stage manager.

As with the metatheatrical presentation of avatars in *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, in *Food Court* 'the distance between actor and character collapses; fiction and reality are forced to collide'.[32] Confronted with these entanglements of the presentational and the representational, the ability to separate the modes of actor, individual and disability icon (along with a fourth mode of the 'character') becomes tested. Instead, we are faced with something like Adorno's idea of the constellation, which is constructed when an object is not isolated under a single dominant concept and all of the concepts that constitute and compete for it are simultaneously invoked.[33] O'Connor notes that this process 'does not subsume the object, but attempts to develop the complex within which it can be articulated without reducing it to a general example of something'.[34] This constellation does not produce the sum total of the object, but gathers the accumulated concepts around it in order to attempt an understanding of its particularity. Nevertheless, as Stone notes, 'the series does not add up to complete knowledge of the object. The group of concepts only centre around […] the object, Adorno says – by implication, forming a circle around it that,

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[31] Tresize and Wake 'Disabling Spectacle', p. 119
[32] Ibid., p. 129
[33] See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 162-163
[34] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013) p. 17

like planets orbiting the sun, never touch the object at their centre'.[35] Although operative in *Food Court*, the dialectical intensity of the constellation is perhaps more centrally placed and critically motivated in the earlier production of *small metal objects.*

'Everything has a fucking value'

small metal objects tells the story of an illicit deal that goes awry when apprentice dealer Steve (Simon Laherty) decides not to move away from the spot he is standing on. Gary (Sonia Teuben), the main dealer and Steve's close friend, calls the deal off despite the urgent haggling of buyer Alan (Jim Russell). In desperation, Alan calls his friend Carolyn (Genevieve Morris), a corporate psychologist, in the hope that she can persuade Steve to get moving again. She begins by offering counselling at a concessionary rate and ends by offering to fellate him. Steve remains impervious, however, causing an exasperated Carolyn to assault him verbally before she and Alan leave. The two dealers then resume their everyday business.

small metal objects differs from *Food Court* and *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* in that it is performed in a busy public space, such as a train station or shopping centre, rather than a theatre venue. The action takes place amongst commuters or consumers who are more aware of the audience, conspicuously seated on a raked bank, than they are of the actors. Listening to the dialogue and an accompanying soundtrack through headphones, the spectators hear the opening dialogue for some time before being able to connect the disembodied voices visually with the chaotic scene before them. In this blurring of boundaries between the rehearsed, the

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[35] Stone, 'Adorno, Hegel and Dialectic', p. 1136

performative and the everyday, *small metal objects* enjoys an irruption of the real in line with postdramatic aesthetics. [36]

At the same time, at the heart of the performance is an intimate chamber piece which observes the dramatic principles of 'theatre as a representation of a *fictive* cosmos' in which 'the textual elements of plot, character [...] and a moving story predominantly told in dialogue [remain] the structuring components'.[37] The four actors remain faithful throughout to the governing logic of the established world, the defined characters that inhabit it, and the situation and relationships within the unfolding narrative. While the bypassers may play to the gallery, the actors maintain the illusion of an imaginary fourth wall, refusing to acknowledge the spectators directly until the curtain call. Yet while the play pursues a compulsive commitment to the enclosed *fabel*, it also finds a contradictory, dialectical drive by opening channels between the rehearsed performance, the everyday traffic it weaves in and out of, and the conspicuous spectators. It does so by stationing the character of Steve at the intersection of these competing realities, while facing (but not seeing) the audience.

Steve offers a mysteriously philosophical explanation for his refusal to move:

        STEVE: I'm missing something, a feeling.
        GARY: A good feeling?
        STEVE: A feeling that I've felt, sensed and known that I've always had.
        GARY: Hmm.
        STEVE: It's my task to be a total man.
        GARY: OK.
        STEVE: I want people to see me. I want to be a full human being.[38]

It is tempting to see this appeal to fullness as most directly contesting the reductive concept of learning disability with its attendant insinuations of intellectual deficiency. Steve's sense of being incomplete resonates with the non-identity of a particular

[36][36] Lehmann, *Postdramatic*, pp. 99-104
[37] Ibid., p.31; emphasis in original
[38] 'small metal objects Script', p. 65

individual with the concept of disability, consistent with Adorno's observation that 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder'.[39] Steve is not explicitly perceived as learning disabled within the text, however, and so the static figure opens a possible resistance to the reductive power of *any* concepts which obscure and diminish a particular object.

In the open relations between the bank of spectators, the rehearsed drama and the everyday world that circulates through the space, the available concepts extend beyond those governed by the *fabel*. To the characters of Alan and Carolyn, Steve is isolated under the dominant concept of 'dealer' and limited by this functional role. At a metatheatrical level, however, neither the illicit deal nor the dramatic plot can progress while Steve remains stationary. The buyers and the unacknowledged spectators are both being denied a resolution of the established scenario. That is, as an obstacle to the dramatic progress of the narrative, the static figure appears under the dual concepts of character *and* actor. Moreover, there is a third level as, to the bypassers within the site of the performance, Laherty is also an unidentified individual obstructing their movement through the public space. In the performance I saw at Stratford East railway station in 2007, Laherty positioned himself on the concourse downstage of a platform so that whenever a train arrived and the commuters flooded out, they needed to peel round him to make their way to the exit.

In the single obstructive action of standing still, the three options of production (and reception) that Schmidt proposes – as disabled icon, as individual and as actor – gather round Laherty as the beginnings of a constellation that also includes the fictional character of Steve. This constellation constructs the object of Steve/Laherty

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[39] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 5

as 'a complex of concepts' which are, as O'Connor notes, 'acquired and accumulated in the history of the object's position in what Adorno terms the social totality'.[40] The constellation not only highlights the particularity of the object but also reveals this social totality which 'has a determinative influence': the meaning of the object is established through the concepts applied to it by virtue of its socio-historical position.

Neither the social totality nor the constellation can capture the fullness of the object, however. For Adorno, a constellation 'illuminates the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden'.[41] The constellation thus offers an experience of the inarticulable remainder of the object once the full range of concepts in the classifying procedure of a social totality is exhausted. It is in this sense that the fullness of the object is ultimately negative, eluding any positive identification under available concepts. This, perhaps, offers an additional option to Schmidt's modes of production and reception: an encounter with the performer as an unidentifiable object that has no clear dramatic, performative or social function. Back to Back can thus be seen to acknowledge and exploit a crucial aspect of perceiving and analysing theatre: that the concepts which shape such understanding are themselves ideologically determined within a reductive social totality which discards the inarticulable dimension of theatrical experience.

In an early section of dialogue, Steve and Gary discuss a pet that was put down, Steve's collection of trivial objects and the appeal of the self-storage business as

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[40] O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, p. 59
[41] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 162

'people can't throw things away'.[42] The continuing attachment to objects deemed to

have outlived their usefulness leads to a shared motto:

> STEVE: Everything has a value.
> GARY: Everything has a value.
> STEVE: Everything has a fucking value.
> GARY: Everything has a fucking value.[43]

This motivation to restore and respect the elusive value of apparently worthless

objects runs parallel to the search for the remainder in the critical procedure of

negative dialectics.

Within *small metal objects*, Steve's/Laherty's refusal to move is ultimately a refusal

of the social totality which categorises him. In order to be realised as a total man, he

obstructs such operations by extracting himself from the processes of negotiated

exchange that settle the value of almost everything around him. Gary's tutelage

about how to deal with customers offers the following advice:

> GARY: Don't give them any less or any more than they ask for. Don't say,
> 'What have you got for me?' You listen. You spend time. It's called
> 'good business'.[44]

This carefully-managed balance of what is offered and received, which allows for no

remainder, contrasts with the more open and intimate disclosures that occur within

Steve's and Gary's friendship, but structure all other relationships within the *fabel*.

As the deal stagnates, Alan's efforts to motivate Steve to move are nothing more

than an attempt to renegotiate the exchange rate for his compliance. His initial

approach is economic, seeking the financial equivalent of Steve's assistance by

offering more money:

> ALAN: It would be good to work this out, now. Would it make any difference if
> I offered you personally another fifty?
> STEVE: *(Silence)*

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[42] 'small metal objects Script', p. 62
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., p. 65

ALAN: I'd go as high as 200 for us to go now.
        STEVE: No, it's OK.[45]

As a property lawyer, he attempts to engage Steve in greed-inducing small talk about

rising house prices. The latter's response – 'it's just cash' – clarifies the play's title,

stripping money of its power to determine human relations by recognising only the

base properties of coins as small metal objects.[46]

The structuring principle of exchange value is more ideologically resilient, however,

and not restricted to the economic dimension of commodity fetishism. Carolyn

introduces new bartering techniques beyond the financial. Her seemingly genuine

offers of counselling support initially tempt Steve, but he closes down again when it

becomes transparent that they are part of the negotiation. Having failed to establish

how much care Steve is worth, her offer to 'suck your fucking dick' goes as far as she

can in determining his value within a sexual economy.[47]

The constellation that gathers around Steve/Laherty is significant in expanding this

ideological processing of exchange value beyond the self-contained world of the

fabel. Just as Steve blockades the expected exchange between seller and buyer,

Simon Laherty the individual blockades the unspoken agreement between busy

people to accommodate each other by exchanging spaces. As an actor, he also

disturbs the economy of production by blockading the conventional exchange

between performer and ticket-holder, a satisfying encounter grounded in resolution.

Complete fulfilment of the dramatic narrative, by allowing the *fabel* to remain a closed

and unifying framework, would continue to deprive Steve/Laherty of his own fullness.

Exposing the *fabel* to an irruption of the real recognises that the dialectical dynamics

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[45] Ibid., p. 67
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., p. 72

of performance reach their limits in frustrating a theatrical process which is itself beholden to ideological operations of exchange.

The negative dialectic, in its accumulation of contradictions without moving towards resolution, is a similarly frustrating critical procedure. Barnett, following Adorno, notes that this too resists the pervasiveness of exchange value as a structuring principle which even underpins Hegelian dialectics. The synthesis of the thesis and antithesis:

> marks the influence of capitalism on Marxist thought in the form of the law of fair exchange. Capitalism seeks to convert the unequal into the equal to foster and promote the universality of capital. The negative dialectic is consequently a Marxist reclamation of its own theoretical arsenal.[48]

In its post-Brechtian operation, then, *small metal objects* seeks to honour extra-ideological value by refusing the apparently fair exchange mechanisms that make the concept equal to the object. Instead, through the interplay of performers, spectators and theatre devices and contexts, it conjures up the negative remainder beyond the ideological constellation. If this constructs the mysterious object of Steve/Laherty at the core of *small metal objects*, it is also at the root of the spectators' tension in *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich.*

'Not empty seats'

In a telling visual motif towards the end of the 'freak porn' moment, Simon crosses the stage and faces the audience, recalling Steve's decisive move in *small metal objects.* In this instance, however, he directly acknowledges the spectators:

> SIMON: Can I please go to the toilet?
> DAVID: Who are you talking to, Simon?
> SIMON: The imagined audience.[49]

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[48] Barnett, 'Performing Dialectics', p. 52
[49] 'Ganesh Script'., p. 188

His action here is calculated to counteract David's assault on the spectators by undercutting it from within. This is the culmination of a running contradiction throughout the scene, in which Simon refutes the premise, purpose and legitimacy of the 'freak porn' moment. In doing so, he pursues a dialectical confrontation with David which is curiously overlooked in all of the analyses of the episode discussed above.

When David first proposes a turn to the audience, arousing the fascination of the other avatars, Simon alone is instantly resistant:

DAVID: I was imagining that there were people in these empty seats, right.
SIMON: They're not empty seats.
DAVID: No, they are empty seats.
SCOTT: Simon, please!
DAVID: There's nobody in these seats.
SIMON: Right.[50]

After this momentary capitulation, Simon intensifies his resistance throughout the scene. At the heart of his concern is a rebuttal of David's presumption in imagining the audience. This tops and tails the episode, beginning with Simon's original insistence that the seats are not empty, and concluding with his ironic appeal to the 'imagined audience' for permission to go to the toilet.

The extent to which the actual spectators apparently accept their own shame in response to David's accusation perhaps marks the power of the concept of the audience as exploitatively voyeuristic. Simon's direct contradiction, on the other hand, aligns this concept with the emptiness of the rehearsal room seats. To bring forward a key phrase from *small metal objects,* his appeal is to the material particularity of the audience as full human beings beyond the conceptual. In seeking to have the fullness of the spectator asserted, Simon's position in the 'freak porn'

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[50] Ibid., p. 183

moment pursues the same affirmation of value that Steve claims in *small metal objects*, a value that can be neither articulated nor quantified and can only be encountered as a negative beyond the exchange-based parameters of ideology.

The formal complexities of the 'freak porn' episode, however, reveal the theatrical limitations that hamper any such affirmation. The startling direct address of David's initial accusation works on a double level, as a private action from the past of the rehearsal room and as a public address to the present targets of the audience. As such, the temporal distance that separates the accuser from the unknown accused makes the address more accidental than direct. In the confused spontaneity of the moment, in which the audience experiences the re-enactment of an actor's previous improvisation as if it is original, the underlying fracture between speech and reception is overwhelmed, though not overcome. Although it is more insistent on the particularity of the audience, Simon's address is no less determined by its own past, and so designed for imaginary spectators. An immanent contradiction is exposed in the formal operation: even as it cuts through the spatial separation between stage and auditorium, direct address is diverted by the temporal distance between production and reception. The address is always indirect because it is predicated on an imaginary audience which inserts itself conceptually between actors and spectators in the rehearsed event.

It is the inevitable insertion of the concept that frustrates Grehan's desire for a full reprieve from the ideological co-ordinates that shape the spectators' consciousness of learning disabled actors. The spectator thus appears to itself as a constellation, in which any progressive attitude is contradicted by the construction of the spectator, within the social totality, as a consumer of pornographic experiences. It is not merely

that new co-ordinates that might alleviate this unbearable tension are not forthcoming. The fundamental difficulty is that any renegotiation of the parameters must remain predicated on conceptualisations of the spectator, work, actor and disability. Adorno argues that the 'task of dialectical cognition is not [...] to construe contradictions from above and to progress by resolving them [...] Instead, it is up to dialectical cognition to pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing'.[51] If theatre is too indebted to concepts to achieve the conscious resolution of contradictions, the 'freak porn' moment demonstrates that it is more than capable of experiencing the inadequacy of thought and thing in the irreconcilability of the imagined audience and its remainder, the actual audience that is not exhausted by David's concept. It is as a response to this inadequacy that the spectator desires a release from the guilt of the imaginary spectator. By having no positive way forward, the frustrated desire for a reprieve, which realises the inadequacy of all conceptualisations through its own lack of an available concept, forms the very reprieve from ideological complicity that the spectator longs for.

This thwarted desire is not simply concerned with the self-preoccupation of the spectator, but extends to liberating the contradictory object of the actor perceived to have a learning disability from theatrical structures. The inconclusive debate about the validity of Mark undertaking the role of Hitler, which gives rise to the 'freak porn' moment, is part of the general negotiation between the metatheatrical episodes of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* and the epic fantasy of the Hindu God reclaiming the swastika that is under construction. This ongoing negotiation is also endlessly motivated by inadequate efforts to find an equivalence between the identity of a thing, as formed in conceptual thought, and the thing itself.

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[51] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 153

'The most expensive item on stage'

In his assault on the audience, David's overriding concern is not to confront the exploitative actions of the spectators so much as to create an edgy atmosphere as a means of supporting his case that the anticipated tensions of Mark playing Hitler would be theatrically dynamic. The casting, he argues, should be embraced for its spectacular potential rather than renounced as unethical or inartistic as (imagined) audiences 'just want to see a person fucked up because they didn't get it right'.[52] Far from rebuking the audience for indulging in 'freak porn', David is keen to encourage their fascination artistically and commercially.

He continues to propose accordingly that re-enactments of the ensemble's tense arguments should form part of the finished play. It is from within this re-enacted scenario that Simon is most forcefully opposed to any such re-enactment:

> DAVID: It's high emotion – really exciting.
> BRIAN: I'm glad you approve of it.
> DAVID: Yeah. It will excite these people.
> SIMON: Stop it.[53]

Simon's objection to the intrinsic exploitation of both actors and spectators quickly escalates as David's motivation turns to financial rather than theatrical possibilities, noting that prospective audiences 'are going to pay big money'.[54] The discussion accordingly becomes preoccupied with economic value leading to David's insistence that 'Mark is the most expensive item on stage at the moment'.[55] It is at this point that Simon asks the audience for permission to go to the toilet, recalling Steve's obstructive movement in *small metal objects*. The request has a symbolic significance within the play's framework, as the bathroom has already been

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[52] 'Ganesh Script', p. 187
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., p. 188

established as a place of withdrawal from the unbearable tensions of the rehearsal room.

Simon, like Steve, adopts a general strategy of withdrawal throughout the play. He largely abstains, for example, from active participation in the debates about Mark's capacity to take on the role of Hitler. This reticence does not appear as a non-committal, insecure or apathetic position, as he is given to strident statements when necessary. For example, he notes forcefully at one point that Mark 'has every right to be working here', a position of absolute principle that is consistent with Steve's motto that everything has a value.[56]

At another moment, he bluntly rejects Scott's theoretical objections for their privileging of intellectual comprehension:

> SCOTT: Simon, do you comprehend what it is to represent a Jew in the Holocaust?
> SIMON: Fuck off, Scott.[57]

Simon's refusal to engage suggests that he considers debate insufficient. His own attempt to explain the challenge of playing Hitler to Mark verbally is itself linguistically troubled:

> SIMON: Do you want to play Hitler? Adolf Hitler, the chancellor of Germany. It's a good part. No, Mark, Hitler's bad. But you're good. You're a really good guy, but the character you're going to play is a really bad guy. No. No, Mark. I want you to play the guy with the moustache.[58]

The comedy of this scene could be seen as arising from Mark's difficulties in understanding, forcing Simon to rework the explanation continually. Such a perception would be consistent with Scott's objection that Mark is not intellectually capable of representing Hitler.

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[56] Ibid., p. 182
[57] Ibid., p. 170
[58] Ibid.

From an alternative perspective, the comedy acknowledges the inadequacy of language itself, most notably in the confusion between Hitler as a 'good part' and a 'bad guy'. This is not simple wordplay, as the same sense of contradiction runs throughout the descriptions of Hitler by other avatars elsewhere in the play. These alternate between the objectionable and the appealing, as 'a savage dog', 'the role of a lifetime', 'a sort of egomaniac' and 'a cultural icon'. Within such descriptions, Hitler ranges across the human, the representational and the transcendent. He is variously, and simultaneously, a psychologically-motivated individual, a figure of historical and cultural significance, a political symbol and an exemplar of evil. Seen from this angle, Mark's incomprehension reflects a failure within language, as the container of conceptualisation and identity-thinking, to find a smooth equivalence with a complex object. The beguiling power of language, however, makes this appear as Mark's inadequacy. Just as Steve strips coins of their mysterious effects by reducing them to the basic properties of small metal objects, so Simon diminishes this linguistic power by concluding that Hitler is merely 'the guy with the moustache'.

Simon's explanation also struggles to clarify points of identification, or distinction, between Mark and Hitler, again along the confusions of 'good' and 'bad'. Without suggesting that any full equivalence is possible between actor and character, it is the degree of synthesis between Mark and Hitler that motivates the debate about casting. Scott's position is that the fullest possible realisation of the Hitlerian concept is necessary, and his objection to the casting is built on a perception that Mark is inadequate to the task. This distribution of value prioritises the character, such that Mark's perceived incapacity as an actor constitutes his worthlessness in the theatrical process.

Alternatively, David prioritises Mark's value as an actor over the legitimate representation of Hitler. He does not, however, dispute Scott's expectation that Mark is inadequate to the role: indeed, this inadequacy is the source of the latter's value, through the anticipation that the imagined audience will enjoy witnessing the failure. Mark's value is still determined by the economy of production, although measured here by commercial appeal and an aesthetic grounded in presentation, whereas Scott combines a traditionally representational aesthetic with ethical concerns. Simon, alternatively, maintains respect for an extra-ideological value beyond the conceptual contradiction of the learning disabled actor.

As such, he approaches the question as a matter of theatrical possibility that only fully exists in the inarticulable experience of performance. Having struggled to explain the role verbally, he invites Mark to improvise a scene in which Hitler kills Levi, a disabled Jewish character, and so moves away from discussion to the physical explorations of rehearsal. Through this process, Simon replaces attempts to assess Mark's performance as Hitler as a question of the equivalence between two objects with the production of a singular object, Mark-playing-Hitler. Neither Mark nor Hitler are privileged in fashioning the identity of the new object, but both circulate round it as part of its constellation. As such, neither side determines or subsumes the other, extending the theatrical possibilities beyond the purely conceptual by allowing all of the contradictions that such an object contains to co-exist in our experience of the performance. Both Simon and David pursue a dialectical understanding of Mark's performance, based on the tensions between actor and role, but they differ in starting from materialist and idealist positions respectively. Adorno observes that:

> It is when things in being are read as a text of their becoming that idealistic and materialistic dialects touch. But while idealism sees in the inner history of immediacy its vindication as a stage of the concept, materialism makes that inner history the measure, not just of the untruth of concepts, but even more of the immediacy in being.[59]

David's desired exploitation of Mark vindicates the contradictory concept of the learning disabled actor by anticipating the performance as a failure and imagining the audience's voyeuristic pleasure. In this reading, cognitive impairment, Hitler, actor and audience are all relatively stable ideas. Simon's approach shows far less preconceived faith in either Mark or Hitler as isolated concepts, and so presents the newly-fashioned and provocative object of Mark-playing-Hitler as a constellation around which these flawed concepts circulate, coincide and clash. Viewed in this way, the concepts are not affirmed but encountered in such a way that the inadequacy of each is illuminated. This is not simply a question of the concepts holding each other in tension. The untroubled ease with which Mark shoots the Jewish character draws a line of conceptual consistency with Hitler that contradictions usual expectations of learning disability, and also undercuts both Scott's and David's assumptions that Mark and Hitler are irreconcilable objects.

This principle of the actor and character combining to form a new, constelled object is constantly at play in the crossovers between the two *fabels*, the metatheatrical episodes and the epic fantasy. The role of Hitler ultimately falls to Simon by default as the alternatives have been exhausted, leading one reviewer to note: 'the slightest and most gentle member of the cast plays its biggest monster [...] resulting in a visual disconnect'.[60] Similarly, David – who plays Josef Mengele in the fantasy narrative – becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the character as the play

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[59] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 52-53

[60] Brigid Delaney, 'Ganesh Versus the Third Reich: "do we have the right to perform this"', *Guardian*, 8 August 2014 < http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/08/ganesh-versus-third-reich-edinburgh-festival-2014> [accessed 21 November 2014]

progresses. In this instance, as in *Food Court*, actor and character are brought closer to each other rather than juxtaposed. Having set out to demonstrate the complexities of ownership and authority in Back to Back's ensemble devising process, the metatheatrical episodes of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* thus run away from themselves by collapsing the easy distinction between a progressive director and a fascistic experimenter on disabled bodies.

The dialectical arrangement of concepts around a constellated object in performance is perhaps most acutely experienced at the close of *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich.* Having been sacked from the ensemble following a violent assault on Scott, David is preparing to leave the rehearsal room for the final time. The other avatars have already made their exits, leaving him alone on stage with Mark who is touchingly reluctant to let him go. The actor-director leaves under the pretence of a game of hide and seek in which Mark is visibly 'hidden' underneath an onstage table:

> DAVID: Where are you, Mark? Come out, come out, wherever you are.
> *(Mark knocks.)*
> DAVID: I hear knocking. I hear you. I'm going to find you.
> *(David exits. Mark is left on stage.)*[61]

This is the final stage direction, and the audience is left for a substantial time watching Mark before the lights fadeout. It is impossible to determine in this encounter whether Mark is performing a precise and pre-determined score, whether he is improvising a theatrical moment or whether he is really playing a game of hide and seek which, as we know but Mark may not, is fake. The distinctions between actor, individual, learning disabled icon or character are once again impossible to maintain in our negotiation of this object.

Grehan notes another unbearable tension operating at this point:

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[61] 'Ganesh Script', p. 194

> What are we supposed to do with this? [...] We do not want to see [Mark] (real
> or not) hiding under a table waiting to be found [...] This is the dilemma Back to
> Back Theatre place us in, and it is one that requires a profound reconsideration
> of how we judge a performance, an individual and indeed the act of
> spectatorship.[62]

Here, as in the 'freak porn' moment and Steve's non-action in *small metal objects*, the spectator is in a suspended relationship to an object that is, itself, in a suspended relationship with the concepts that gather around it. It is through the theatrical experience of such constellated objects that elude identification that the remainders of ideological classifications are encountered, provoking but not satisfying a need for profound reconsideration.

Back to Back pursue critical provocation through this theatre of experience as a post-Brechtian form, confronting actors and audience with a situation in which many irresolvable contradictions are brought into restless yet obstructive tension with each other. The ensemble resists the impulse to offer its own critical solution. Instead, it approaches each element of performance from the starting point of the material principle that every thing has a value, even where this exists beyond the conceptual frameworks of the social totality. In seeking merely to honour such inexpressible and unequal value, the dialectical principle – in its endless search for this elusively negative 'fucking value' – reveals itself to be both necessarily compelling and frustrating.

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[62] Grehan, 'Irony', p. 207