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Heroism as the aesthetic dimension of solidarity
Applied and Social Theatre Working Group
TaPRA 2014, Royal Holloway University of London
Wednesday 3rd September 2014

This paper speculates about whether the concepts of heroism and heroic action have any residual relevance for both practice and research in applied theatre. I say residual in order to note from the outset that there are legitimate points of resistance and concern with regard to the heroic; that it can promote a form of worship within human relations that obscures rationality and equality; that, as such, it can be used as a source of ideological complicity, smuggling hegemonic ideas into mainstream consciousness; and that, in particular, it can distort the politics of representation and identity, most notably with regard to gender but also, from my own field, disability, in which the demarcations of hero and villain are too often observed as non-disabled and disabled respectively.

At the same time, there is perhaps a need to observe some caution in dismissing heroism outright, along the same lines that Joe Winston (2010) argued in relation to the similarly-resisted notion of beauty. Winston noted that 'there is one obvious aspect of beauty that such cultural and political debates have tended to ignore and that cannot be wished away; that is, its very ubiquity as a value in areas of human experience ... that marks it out as of central importance in our lives'. Joseph Campbell (2008), in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, attaches a similarly central importance to heroism. In his analysis, all mythical heroes reflect human experience at the levels of both individual psychology and communal rites of passage. The narrative structures of such myths, he argues, reflect stages of human and social developmental processes, while they frequently share symbolic imagery with the dream states of the subconscious and the metaphors employed in ritual.

Campbell's analysis somewhat diminishes the ubiquity of heroism through its sole focus on myth. Our wide-ranging and engaging conversations as co-convenors, preparing over the last year for this conference, and the presentations at the interim event held at Central School of Speech and Drama, have revealed a vast array of heroic types within contemporary consciousness, both real and fictional: superheroes; action heroes; local heroes; war heroes; tragic heroes; comic heroes; romantic heroes; personal heroes from among our immediate networks; global heroes at the level of a Nelson Mandela; sporting heroes; revolutionary heroes; unsung heroes. Such ubiquity argues for the resilience of the heroic as an idea, that it resists resistance. As such, it may be impossible for applied and social theatre to foster an immunity to heroism. Even the instigation of the theme for this year's conference emerged from last year's conference in Glasgow, where the word 'heroic' appeared at the edges of discussions about ecological performance practices. It seems to me the idea of heroism (though not necessarily the word itself) permeates experiences, discussions and representations of applied and social theatre. If so, a critical approach to, and awareness of, the concept and its circulation in both practice and research is crucial.

In the absence of any clearly-formulated, existing conceptualisation of heroism, it's important to open up my own presuppositions about the term that inform the discussion below. The attempt here is to outline the ubiquitous concept as it cuts

across the variety of its own forms. To begin with the obvious, heroism is concerned with the field of human deeds, and can be understood as a quality attached either to the person committing the action or the action itself. The distinction between Campbell's narrow use of the term and my own broader approach is itself a matter of definition; the Oxford English Dictionary notes that the hero of classical mythology, which is at the forefront of Campbell's analysis, is imbued with superhuman abilities; alternatively, in the more commonplace, less hyperbolic usage of the term, the hero is one who is simply admired, a usage which includes but is far from exhausted by the mythological superhero. I would also add other qualifying elements of heroism; the admired people or actions must be motivated by a cause that is greater than themselves, and so not ultimately preoccupied with self-interest; heroism also cannot be intentional or declare itself to be heroic, but must be attributed from the outside – that is, it is a quality of perception, rather than an innate quality of either the person or the deed.

The current example of Will Pooley, the British nurse widely identified by the media as an unsung hero, may be illustrative here. Pooley worked at a hospital for those with ebola in Sierra Leone, where he contracted the disease himself and was flown back to London for emergency treatment. His actions demonstrate commitment to a humanitarian cause, whose beneficiaries extend beyond any sense of self-satisfaction or self-fulfilment that he will gain from them. They also contain the two common tropes of heroism that indicate this sense of external commitment: exposure to personal risk, primarily in this case the risk of infection; and care of the other, often accentuated by the extent to which Pooley is reported to have eased the suffering of his patients, staying at their bedsides long beyond the call of duty.

The paradox of the unsung hero is perhaps the best illustration of heroism as a factor of perception; by definition, an unsung hero is one whose heroic actions are unacknowledged, and yet it only comes into being once it is acknowledged as such. The hero or the heroic deed only exists once it is seen as a hero, making the unsung hero a sung hero like any other. Furthermore, the metaphor of the song perhaps reflects the significance of the form in which the deed is perceived. Winston (2010, p.12) has observed that in ancient Greece, beauty 'was just as likely to be applied to a person's character, to an idea or to a deed than to a human artefact; both an act of courage and a philosophical argument could be described as beautiful'. There are obvious consistencies here with the heroic in the recognition of beauty as an aspect of character, deeds and courageous acts, suggesting that the perception of heroism is sensually driven: it is rooted in aesthetics.

This is crudely illustrated by the opening of a recent Daily Mail article about Pooley, which names him as a 'selfless hero':

Try to imagine yourself as a patient at the neglected Kenema hospital in Sierra Leone, desperately afraid, alone and in pain.

In panic you shout out for help, and then the calm young Englishman arrives at your side, offering water and murmuring soothing words you don't understand — but which make you feel cared for.

That's surely how it must have been when brave William Pooley did his rounds. The British nurse, now struck down by the Ebola virus, must have seemed like an angel to the terrified patients after most of those who should have been nursing them had fled.

(Mooney, 2014)

The construction of heroism begins aesthetically with the call to imagine, to visualise, and is carried through its evocations of character, atmosphere and dramatic tensions. The assessment of the nurse's actions is not pursued through rational analysis but by appeals to sympathy, empathy, despair, joy, hope. The distasteful implications of singing the hero in this way are self-evident, mostly in the alignment of heroic virtues with the stoical English character, claimed as superior by its juxtaposition with the surrendered anguish of the Sierra Leonean patients and the cowardice of their compatriot carers.

And yet, behind the rhetoric, it remains difficult to resist admiration for Pooley, to be wholeheartedly cynical or critical about the mixture of risk and care that appears evident in his actions. The conservative gloss that the Daily Mail lays over the story is not the only available interpretation of these actions, but it does act as a reminder of the potential treachery of the heroic. The counter-possibility exists in heroism's capacity to inspire and reimagine forms of action. The designation of Pooley as an unsung hero is more convenient than meaningful, as he readily fits the dominant model of unsung heroism: a public-spirited and compassionate act of care that is local and unobserved. Yet implicit in the idea of unacknowledged heroism, if seen from the angle of aesthetics, is a previously unrecognised form of the heroic and I would argue for a more discriminating use of this term which retains this sense of surprise. By such a definition, Nelson Mandela can be claimed as an unsung hero for those moments when his actions are re-perceived as admirable rather than terrorising. Acknowledging new forms of heroic action opens up new possibilities of perception and thought.

Perhaps the archetypal unsung hero, often held up as the symbol of radical and revolutionary action, is Antigone, who defies the state in the form of symbolic burials of her traitorous dead brother. The heroic tropes are observed here, as she personally risks the wrath of the punitive dictator Creon, and does so out of an unwavering duty of care for her family. These actions are denied full recognition within the world of the play until they reach their final heroic form with her suicide. The sight of her dead body provokes a capitulation in Creon, and the poetic description of her death fosters a similar acknowledgement throughout the state. The revolutionary potency of her heroic narrative lies in the observation that her commitment demands previously unthinkable, or unsung, forms of action. The efficacy of heroism lies in this formal aspect, rather than the argumentation.

One particular incident from the field of applied theatre has preoccupied me in relation to the theme of heroism, as a failed heroic action which, curiously, also led to

previously unthinkable or unsung forms of theatrical action. In *The Rainbow of Desire*, Boal (1995) describes an episode in which the Arena Theatre is performing an agitprop play exhorting Brazilian peasants to revolt against their oppression by landlords. The failure of this performance is the catalyst that refocuses Boal's theatrical direction, leading to the diverse forms of Theatre of the Oppressed. As the engineer of those forms, it's not I hope an exaggeration to suggest that Boal occupies something of a heroic place within the field of applied and social theatre, certainly under the broad definition of a hero adopted above as one whose ideas, actions and contributions are widely admired. His career and biography are infused with personal risk in the pursuit of political theatre practices and a deep-seated sense of care. And yet, the humbling experience that gave rise to Theatre of the Oppressed can be seen as a failure of heroism.

Boal (1995, p.2) recounts that during the agitprop performance, he and the actors 'sang the heroic text 'Let us spill our blood!', to our rapt audience'. One spectator named Virgilio was sufficiently roused to propose that the actors and villagers should spill their blood together in a bloody revolution after lunch. The actors protested that, while the villagers should revolt, they themselves did not have real guns and so could not participate. Virgilio persisted, as the village had enough guns to spare. The actors, in fear and panic, still refused and were, as Boal says, 'incapable of taking their own advice' (Boal, 1995, p.3). Having set out to inspire heroic action on the part of the villagers, Boal and the other actors faltered when they themselves were asked to commit to heroic action.

Boal acknowledges the episode as a failure of heroism by referring to the incitements of the agitprop text itself heroic. The action is already undone, since it intends to be heroic, and so is more concerned with its own effect than its cause. The unexpected response, with the call to heroic action coming back to alarm the actors, demonstrates the impossibility of controlling perception. Virgilio mistook the guns *and* the heroes for real. More significantly, by refusing to participate in the revolutionary fervour they have instigated, the actors invert the tropes of heroism – personal risk and care of the other – by insisting instead on care of the self and risk of the other.

Following the Virgilio incident, Boal reflects on the personal sense of shame and regret that it provoked. He adopts a 'very beautiful phrase' from Che Guevara: '*solidarity means running the same risks*' (Boal, 1995, p.3). The reflection on solidarity here perhaps introduces another principle that courses through our perceptions of heroic action. Mandela's unsung form of heroism transcends the divisions of apartheid to express solidarity with all South Africans; Antigone's defiant burials express solidarity with the dead in accordance with a law beyond the limitations of the state; and Will Pooley, contrary to the poetic outpourings of the Daily Mail, expresses a supranational solidarity with Sierra Leoneans rather than a nationalistic solidarity with English virtue. The failure of heroism in the Virgilio incident, in which risk and care were denied, was ultimately the actors' failure to express solidarity with the villagers.

These examples of solidarity all noticeably involve the hero transcending their own identity, reaching beyond the self to the other. This is perhaps the meeting point between the heroic and expressions of solidarity, as motivation by a cause that is

greater than self-interest necessarily implies solidarity with the other. To express solidarity, demonstrating forms of support and affinity that are not already self-evident, is intrinsically bound up with notions of otherness. Boal (1995, p.3) acknowledges this to some extent in reflecting on the type of solidarity attempted in didactic theatre, writing that '[w]e white men from the big city, there was very little we could teach black women of the country'. The intrinsic limitations of self and other, however, demand a qualification of Guevara's beautifully balanced phrase: self and other cannot run the same risks. Having contracted ebola, Will Pooley is not interred in the struggling hospital he has served, but flown back to London where the full resources of the NHS are made available. In calling for a post-apartheid South Africa built on principles of equality, Nelson Mandela asks white South Africans to put at stake privileges which the black community are not risking; and Antigone, as a woman, is not subject to the same laws as the dead brother she avenges. In the latter case, Antigone's tragic suicide is not an act of despair but perceived as heroic because it is a fitting and final expression of solidarity with the dead, consistent with her own commitment.

My proposal here is that this formal expression of solidarity is critical in taking a judicious approach to heroism within applied and social theatre. As noted at the outset, I contend that a resistance to the concept of heroism is problematic, as it is a ubiquitous and uncontrollable force of aesthetics. The perceived actions of the heroic figure, underpinned by commitment to a cause beyond themselves, arouse admiration, tied to the sense of personal risk and/or care of the other that is read into them. If, however, we measure heroism according to the degree of risk or care exhibited, then we remain trapped in this moment of foggy admiration. This may open up valid and valuable paths, or its influence may lead us down less fruitful or even darker avenues. If, on the other hand, we pay careful attention to the form of the heroic action and, in particular, uncover the full extent of the solidarity expressed within them, then we may arrive at a more judicious measure that enables us to distinguish one heroic model from another.

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