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Multiple Dialogue; a reflection on the influences of Goat Island's use of dialogue and response on my work as a teacher and practitioner within Higher Education

Goat Island Lastness, Raiding the Archive, And Pedagogical Practices in Performance. At the Nuffield Theatre, Lancaster University 29th February-2nd March 2008

I first saw a Goat Island performance about ten years ago at the Ferons Art gallery in Hull. I was working for Humberside Theatre in Education at the time and what I saw couldn't have been more different from the work I was engaged in. The over riding memory of that performance was the sense of care and deliberateness about everything that was taking place in the performance space. It was as if time had slowed down and with this slowing came an invitation to experience what was seen and heard differently. On reading Matthew Goulsh's *39 Micro lectures* a number of years later, the section titled slow thinking made particular sense of this for me.

I'd like to talk today about the ways in which Goat Islands work has influenced my own work both as a teacher and a practitioner within Higher education. I've been working in Universities for about eight years now. First with Bretton Hall which then merged with the University of Leeds, then with Manchester Metropolitan University and currently with Huddersfield University. All of these universities pride themselves in allocating a sustained amount of time for lecturers to work with students in the making space in order to try out ideas in practice, to investigate through practice. My particular interest here is in politically progressive making processes and methodologies. This interest in practical research sits alongside my investigations into how and indeed if a Marxist ideology can find an articulate aesthetic within contemporary culture.

I'd like to speak today about some making processes I'm currently engaged in, all of which have been inspired by Goat Islands' work. I've come to think about these areas of work as dialoguing. To give shape to this paper I've considered dialoguing in three distinct areas, although boundaries between them don't exist so conveniently in practice. The first area is a notion of dialoguing as teaching, teaching as dialogue. This involves a conscious attempt to communicate ideas, concepts and practices from one person to another and indeed a conscious effort to receive ideas, concepts, practices. The second area is the notion of dialogue as response; where a response is given to an idea, a person, a concept and then perhaps in response to that response a further response is given and on and on until a whole network of responses is construed; a multiplicity of responses. The third notion of dialogue, (and this is a term I've come to use for myself, you may have a more fitting term for it) is a dialogue of non-correspondence; here two or more ideas or things or sounds or images which don't easily or naturally sit together are brought together in the performance space and this very bringing together invites the spectator to re-locate themselves in order to experience that bringing together fully.

Dialogue as Teaching

I remember attending a Goat Island Summer School. We sat on the floor in a circle and the first thing I remember Mathew Ghoulish saying was; "this is your first day at school and you've all brought your new school books and your new sharpened pencils.." and I remember thinking there are practitioners here, there are lectures and teachers and Mathew Ghoulish has deliberately opened by positioning us as children. And yet even in the moment it didn't seem patronising. It was infact an invitation to position oneself as a learner or a pupil in relation to a teacher, and to do this, to make such a shift of position, requires both an invitation and a desire to do so. Openings, as the transitional moment between one world and another, are important to Goat Island and it was with

characteristic care and deliberateness that this opening invitation was offered, and simultaneously the summer school and the dialogues of teaching and learning commenced.

We didn't stay in the role of learners throughout. By the end of the two week period we had shifted between the roles of teacher and learner numerous times. We were sent as learners, on various research tasks and later were required to adopt the role of teacher in order to relate the findings of these investigations to the other Summer school participants. It is important to note here that our research tasks were focused on subjects which we couldn't have been familiar with, for example, to research a specific site, or a specific area of local history. The findings we taught and how we taught them provided primary source material for the making processes. Dialogues of teaching and learning are not only taught to Goat Island summer school participants as a way of generating performance material, but it is one of the methods employed by the company to generate their own performance material.

I come from a political theatre background or more specifically a Theatre in Education background at a time when theatre in education was considered, or certainly considered itself to be a political theatre movement. At that time theatre in Education companies were comprised of permanent company members who were committed to the relationship between theatre, educational practices and political change. The umbrella organisation for these companies at that time was SCYPT; the standing conference of young peoples theatre. A central concern for SCYPT and the companies it was comprised of, was a consideration of how power could be equally distributed, not only amongst company members, but also amongst the young people those companies came into contact with. The ideal aim was that the working processes of those companies would become a microcosm of a democratic model. This democratic model didn't exist in the wider social and political landscape but the hope was that political theatre movements could and should influence moments of political change from the micro to the macro level. Sometimes these ambitions bore fruits momentarily but largely they didn't. Nevertheless, these were the ambitions, a desire for a utopian, democratic model of work. What is fascinating for me is that this dialogue of teaching, this shift of authority from learner to teacher, is a way of achieving an equal distribution of power relationships without ever talking about an equal distribution of power and responsibility within the company or within the making space. For me this is a politically progressive model of work without ever directly considering models of democracy or political change.

At the moment I'm working with a year 3 Special Study group who are making a piece of contemporary political theatre and are considering areas such as Asylum seeking, racism and immigration. The group come from a variety of different social and political backgrounds. They began their process by engaging in library and book based research and considering verbatim forms. Later they began to arrange and engage in a series of dialogues with experts and interested parties in the field. They have attended council meetings, met with asylum seekers and local politicians from both sides of the debate, including members of the BNP. They have conducted one on one interviews with these people, recorded them and often met again with their dialogue partners when questions arose from their reflection and consideration of the initial material. In this sense they are all involved in unique research which takes them away from their familiar knowledge base and during the scheduled times, when they pass on their findings of this field research to other members of the group, they necessarily become teachers, become experts. Clearly there are differences between the nature of this process and the way in which Goat Island employ dialogues of teaching and learning in their own making processes. The students work is already bounded by the title of the module: contemporary political theatre and as such, unlike Goat Island theatre making processes, it has a sense of an implicit destination. And yet the students are not required to present a solution or to make a coherent political statement in their final group presentation. On the contrary, the aim of the final presentation is for the students to weave together their disparate and very different research experiences, in order to address the complexities and contradictions inherent within these issues which directly affect their own communities. Perhaps a significant similarity between the way in which Goat Island employ dialogues of teaching and those inspired by the company and employed here is that both facilitate the participants' agency in generating performance material and contain an implicit rejection of fixed hierarchical structures. In the past politically driven companies such as Joint Stock believed that utilising socialist organisational structures was enough to reject hierarchy and create a democratic process of

working. Their attempts at collaborative working processes in the form of structures of living and working together, endless discussions and committee meetings were fraught with difficulties, which in the end resulted arguably in a re-formation rather than a resolving of hierarchical structures. By contrast Goat Island do not share the same ideological incentives as Joint Stock and yet their uses of dialogues of teaching with the position shifts from teacher to pupil and back again are potentially, implicitly and *structurally* democratic.

Dialogue as Response

At the Goat Island Summer School I attended, I remember Matthew Ghoulish saying: “In America we don’t know how to talk to each other, we think we do, but we don’t, we need to rethink that” Dialogue as response might be understood as an attempt to find new ways to discuss and develop our own working practices and the working practices of others. It is often the case that a response to a piece of artistic practice involves a judgement or criticism, dialogues of response side steps this and by so doing also sidesteps the value judgements and power relations upon which such judgements and criticisms are often directly or indirectly made. Here a response to artistic practice is never a call to improve, or make better, to edit, or make right, but rather an invitation to reconsider the material from a different perspective. At the Summer School Matthew Ghoulish said something of the nature of miracles and problems which went something like; “if you look for problems then problems will proliferate but if you look for miracles then miracles will proliferate.” For me this comment illuminates the structures of dialogue of response. Instead of finding points of critical objection, the artist/spectator unearths the potentialities in their own experience of the work and creates a new piece of work (whatever form it might take) in response. Attention to the relationship between form and content is key in developing this form of response. A writing exercise led by Karen Christopher at the Bristol Summer School I attended may serve to illustrate the point:

[Karen Christopher]: Write a description of an accident you have experienced. You have three minutes to do this.

[My Response]: Warm sunny day the coach had dropped us back at school after a day trip to Blackpool. Two or three of us walking up Stradbroke Road, warm and happy dazed a little with the heat. Balancing on the kerb, one foot in front of the other arms out stretched. The kerb becoming like a tight rope. Talking while balancing. Balancing while talking.. A roaring sound, only for a second, then falling forward, face against gravel. Remember thinking “try to feel as if it just feels like bad cramp, bad cramp.

[Karen Christopher]: Rewrite the incident in terms of its’ numbers, or rewrite it using numbers? Whichever you prefer and whichever way you take this instruction to mean.

[My Response]:

- 1 Sunny Day
- 1 Day trip to Blackpool
- 2 or 3 of us walking
- 1 of us laughing, 1 of us talking, 1 of us balancing on the kerb as if it were a tightrope
- 1 motorcyclist out of control
- 1 moment standing, 1 moment flat on her face
- 2 or 3 minutes go by, or 2 or 3 hours go by or it seems like 2 or 3 days go

by

[Karen Christopher]: Take a look at the original account again and rewrite it using a microscope.

[My Response]: breeze touching finger tips
finger tips swaying up and down in the breeze
verocity of force, fingers slam to the pavement
blood trickles into gravel, gravel coated in red syrupy blood. She can see
the end of her nose and the gravel. She waits watching blood mix with
gravel.

[Karen Christopher]: Rewrite the original account again this time using a hatchet. Whatever that might mean to you.

[My Response]:

COACH STOP. OUT THEY GET. BOYS, GIRLS, LAUGHING PUSHING
RUNNING, BUSY ROAD. LOTS OF CARS. HERE HE COMES TOO
FAST NO TIME NO SEE NO RUN NO HIDE SWERVE JOLT PAVEMENT
BANG SLOW SLOW DOWN SLOW MOTION SLOW WWW SLOW WW
TIGHT ROPE DOWN TRAPEZE DOWN GOAL

Rather than processing the material rationally through analytical processes of critical judgement, the invitation here is to reconsider your own work through an interrogative application of a series of artistic forms which serve to distance, de-familiarise and ultimately to challenge the authorial thesis of the original source material.

The dynamic of such a process might be understood as the perpetual deconstruction of the conscious intent of the maker leading to the possibility of presenting the performance material from multiple perspectives and thus inviting a complex response from the viewer rather than simply agreement or disagreement with the thesis.

A few summers ago as part of my practice based research I again initiated a making process which involved performers conducting a series of dialogues with members of the public. The three performers involved in the process researched the Iraq war and became specifically interested in different aspects of the conflict. Liz was particularly interested in the political framework of the war, Anna the religious aspects and Pete in the Military, in the sense of the soldiers daily experience of living and fighting in Iraq. I located dialogue partners for the performers who would compliment their areas of research. I found a professor of Middle Eastern politics from Manchester Metropolitan University for Liz, an Inman from a local mosque for Anna and a soldier on leave from the war to meet with Pete. The performers engaged in dialogues with these people and to a greater or lesser extent became quite attached to them as well as what they were learning from them. The final performance, amongst other things, was to involve a series of dialogues between the performers themselves which would draw material from their individual dialoguing experiences. The aim was not to consciously edit the material according to a political agenda as this would lack a responsibility to the complexity of the source material. Understanding 'dialogue as response' through Karen's teaching inspired us to construct and engage in new performance forms which deterred us from editing the material according to an imposed political agenda which would

homogenise the complexity of the source material. Each form introduced a manageable distance to the performer's emotional attachment to the material and simultaneously encouraged a new perspective through which to consider content. For example, in the first exercise, the performers were asked to focus on specific memorable verbal and non-verbal aspects of their dialogue partners' mode of communication. After these were recalled, isolated and presented the performers recreated a debate they had formerly held between themselves but were here required to forfeit the original narrative drive to a focus on utilising the selected aspects of their dialogue partners mode of communication as the main vehicle through which to communicate and emphasise their role in the debate.

In another exercise the performers were asked to focus on their own verbal and non-verbal modes of communication which involved each performer interviewing their friends and family (usually by telephone) to ascertain the verbal and non-verbal strategies which they had been seen to use or embody to win or take on particular roles in argument. The performers then constructed performance forms using these opinions/ perspectives on themselves as source material and the original content of their debate was processed through these forms. Each of these examples might be likened to a Brechtian approach in which the *gestus* of the participant becomes the object of political analysis. And yet the exercises were not pointedly undertaken to evidence or substantiate an ideological agenda but rather achieved a re-imagining of the content through an engagement with multiple forms creating contrasting perspectives and therefore encouraging the spectator (and the participant) to ask questions in relation to the initial representation of the source material.

Dialogue as Non Correspondence

Dialogue as non- correspondence is a particular performance dynamic wherein two contrasting texts (whether these are texts of language, objects, sounds or movement scores) are brought together within the performance space necessitating a perspective shift in the spectator in order to experience this coming together fully. It is a performance dynamic which often characterises the work of Goat Island. In *39 Micro lectures* Goulish cites Hijikata as one of the founding influences on the company's work and quotes sections of his writings which arguably bear some meeting points with this notion of a 'dialogue of non-correspondence'. For example;

Hijikata:

I once actually took the water dipper from the kitchen and secretly put it out in the field. I put it out there, thinking it was a pity for it to be in the cupboard, where the sun never shines. So I tried to show the outside scenery in the field to the water dipper.

Goulish contextualises the quote as follows:

We have never tried to contradict ourselves, but only to allow multiplicity. Contradictions arise as well as strange harmonies.

Considering Hijikatas strength of influence on the company it is perhaps unsurprising that the first performance I can recall to which I might relate this notion of a 'dialogue of non-correspondence' is a performance I saw approximately twenty years ago at Saddlers Wells by Shanki Juku; a pupil of Hijikata's.

The performance opened with Juku performing extraordinarily complex dance movements whilst cradling what appeared to be a stuffed bird in his arms. When he placed this 'stuffed bird' at the front of the stage it became apparent it was a live peacock as within seconds and, with what I remember as an amplified roar, it shook its' feathers into a brilliant arc and proceeded to walk around the performance space as Juku danced. Juku did not dance 'with' the peacock and yet his dancing in the same space as the bird for the final duration of the work invited the spectator's eye to move from one to the other and eventually to see and except both within the same movement.

A dialogue of non-correspondence is not comparable to a Brechtian notion of juxtaposition where two contrasting elements are placed side by side in order to allow the audience to experience the jolt of the dialectic, as here there is no cognitive framework of cause and effect. Rather, the spectator is invited to re-position him or herself only in order to capture the *gestalt* experience of the artwork. Elements, which in life have no reason to be in the same space, aspire to a temporary logic and correspondingly invite the audience to experience patterns and connections where rationally and normatively there are none. This is much more than an aesthetic conceit or a creation of interesting and attractive patterns on stage. Brecht understood the ideology of seeing and his entire project of *gestus* could be understood as a vehicle through which to train the spectator to 'see' that which outside the performance space, in the normative rhythms and structures of life is invisible to the eye. Here a dialogue of non-correspondence trains the eye to entertain the possibility of seeing new relationships and as yet unrealised connections. The Last maker is characterised by such moments. Last night I briefly described the notion of non-correspondence to Peter, the organiser of this conference and asked if he recognised any such moments in the performance of *The Last Maker*. He described a moment when Brian, wearing a green flat cap and carrying a saw which seemed to be a mark of his 'characters' profession as well as his choice of musical instrument, brought a wooden stool into the performance space, placed it in front of the model of the Hagia Sophia and perched on it looking calmly out at the audience. In this moment there seemed to be no connection between this country workman and the suggestion of the complex, ornate architecture and the historical and religious implications represented by the model positioned behind him. Peter remembered consciously questioning the image and then 'forgetting to' as after a moment the collision of the two images became normative in *the* performance world of *The Last Maker*.

From earlier in the same performance I remember Brian instructing Lito to fetch two minarets and position them on the construction of the Hagia Sophia. This she did with the same sense of care and deliberateness with which the mosque/museum had been 'built' with the bodies and voices of the company in the initial stages of *The Last Maker*. However, the moment before she placed the minarets she executed a short, almost comic little dance which seemed to have no bearing on the sense of quiet religiosity which infused the moment. I recall an urge to laugh and yet the traverse setting of the performance space, a regular feature of Goat Islands' work, discouraged any such expression as the sense of watching and being watched by other spectators across the divide of the performance space tends to encourage a stillness and an internalisation of any emotional response. A moment later a sound effect of a horse baying somewhere in the distance was layered into the performance moment introducing yet another element to the fabric of the on-stage world. I recognise Peter's reaction to the moment he described in the sense that I recall being initially puzzled before enjoying a strange correspondence (or no-correspondence) between these non unifiable elements.

In his book *The Universal Exception* Slavoj Zizek cites well documented social evidence relating to post revolutionary Russia. He argues that directly after the revolution people did not know how to celebrate events such as birthdays. It seemed inappropriate

to remember what they used to do before they were 'free' but impossible to imagine what to do now.

Zizek quotes this anecdote as an explanation of the failure of Marxist revolutionary politics which, he argues, focused on the over throw of the status quo and resisted providing any clues as to how we might live our lives after that. This was deeply flawed thinking according to Zizek who believed this to be the reason why Stalin followed Lenin.

Bodies cannot be rewvolutionised like a state. Ideologies are inscribed in our bodies by way of habits, memories, gestures and indeed our entire way of being and elating to others and the world around us.

Brecht's extended pre-occupation with gestus focused on this problem and aimed to locate the ideology in the gesture in order to irradicate it. Brecht could never resolve this, perhaps to invoke Matthew's idea because he focused on the problem and therefore problems proliferated.

It takes great care and deliberateness(or perhaps a sense of exactness as Stephen was talking about yesterday) to move away from the ideological body.

Goat Islands' making practices uproot the body from its' ideological habits and invite us to think differently about the ways in which we make our work and make ourselves in relation to our work.