

CHAPTER 8

Redemptive Theatre: When the Performance Is in the Silence

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Abstract: In this short frame for a creative research project, we outline a theatrical form that we are tentatively calling “redemptive theatre” – theatre that tells stories of people struggling with a mistake, a burden of guilt or an experience of being wronged. We created this form in the context of privileged South Africans navigating the landscape of systemic injustice and unconscious bias. We have performed the first version of redemptive theatre three times and, through a participatory action research process, documented the form and its principles as outlined here. The process has shown itself to consist of three distinct phases: first, identification of the story; second, developing the script; and third, the performance. After the initial identification process, it was performed and reworked three times to produce the current structural design. We present this design to encourage performances that reframe dominant and habitual narratives, disrupt boundaries, challenge stereotypes and give people a chance to redeem themselves, both in their own eyes and in other people’s. The form of redemptive theatre aligns with Jacques Rancière’s idea of an aesthetic regime and the concept of democracy as a redistribution of what can be seen, heard and experienced. By framing stories that are politically unpopular, we bring stories to the fore that are silenced (unseen and unheard).

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Introduction

This contribution offers insight into a theatrical invention we tentatively call “redemptive theatre”. The artistry and subsequent redemptive value of the work relies on the art of story sharing rather than on clever or profound words or on performances that are high in artistic quality or impact.

For us, redemptive theatre is an experiment in theatrical form – an experiment that in itself is worth noticing. While the experiment is ongoing, we report here on the result of three iterations. To help the reader understand what we present, we offer an overview of the aim of the artistic enquiry, the context in which it was undertaken, the elements that have emerged as important for its ongoing value and an overview of its theoretical underpinnings. As evidence of the artistic work itself, we offer the script of the last performance, a video clip of the performance, a plan of its facilitation (which forms a central part of the design) and transcriptions of audience responses to the work.

Worth noting, too, is that the work is created in the frame and discipline of applied theatre – a field that places as much value on the impact of the work in terms of its intentions to shift perceptions and bring about learning and social change, as it does on aesthetics and artistic integrity. This means that as much artistry might be present in the interactive design of how audiences engage with the work as in its execution as performance.

Aims of the creative enquiry

The main aims of the creative enquiry are threefold:

1. To create, through theatre, a dialogical performance form that can redeem a story that is generally perceived as, or conventionally accepted as, irredeemable.

2. To make theatre where the silences between words have body.
3. To ask the whole community to own the voices that they silence and accept them as part of our collective reality.

Context

In 2018 three theatre makers came together to explore stories of privilege in a world focussed on giving voice to the silenced, oppressed voices in South Africa. We experienced a polarisation in the conversation about prohibition and privilege, oppressed and oppressor. Our observation was that when women voice out against patriarchy, there may be silent male voices who want to challenge patriarchy in their own lives and minds but cannot find a platform for working through their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Against the backdrop of the voices of Africa calling for decolonisation and working towards understanding how to give voice to African wisdom, traditions and marginalised knowledge systems, the voices of the privileged race, gender and generation – experiencing silencing when trying to recognise the problematics this embodies – seeks somehow to address these through theatre-making. Likewise, the voice of the disenfranchised race, gender and generation encounters opposition from the privileged or oppressive who prefer that the status quo should not be disrupted. Silence sits in, and is discovered in, the in-between.

Description

Redemptive theatre currently exists as a collaborative workshop performance in its third rendition. It is theatre that tells stories of people struggling with a mistake, a burden of guilt or an experience of being wronged. We created this work in the context of privileged South Africans navigating the landscape of systemic injustice and unconscious bias. We did this through stories that spoke through the lenses of race, gender and generational issues, using the creation of the work as an attempt to centre the unpopular story.

While many different elements were experimented with, those aspects of the design that remained stable fall broadly into three phases:

1. Identification of the story; 2. Developing the script; 3. The performance. We focus here on the design of the actual performance. The elements that had remained present through all three performances are as follows:

1. The stories are lived experiences documented by the performers themselves.¹
2. The space is arranged so that there is no level difference between audience and performers – e.g. stairs to climb to get on stage. Audience and performers are placed as close to each other as makes sense in the space available.²
3. The script is made available to everyone either on printed copies, or by projecting it behind performers for the audience to follow.³
4. Performers each hold their own script in hard copy or on a tablet.
5. At the start, audience members are introduced to the characters/story tellers, including the character named “Silence”.
6. The “rules of engagement” are explained:⁴
 - a. Any audience member may, at any point in the telling, walk onto the performance area, tap a story teller on the shoulder, and swap places with them: thereby the audience member takes over from the story teller.
 - b. Any character may, at any point in the telling, choose to get off stage by leaving their script behind.
 - c. The telling will not be resumed by any remaining character until the story is picked up again by someone from the audience.⁵

1 Like Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre, the stories used are real-life stories rooted in lived experience rather than fictional made-up stories (Boal, 1993, 2002).

2 This relates to the breaking of the fourth wall in Brechtian theatre practice and many other interactive theatre forms since (Brecht, 1964).

3 Reminiscent of Brechtian alienation effect (Brecht, 1964).

4 Here we are influenced by our experience of applied improvisation, where an improvisation game is explained through a set of rules or restrictions within which certain surprising connections and creative resonances become possible (Johnstone, 1981). Anne Bogart’s (2005) theatre principles, encompassing an improvisational frame that drives awareness and sense play through considerations of Time, Space, Story, Movement and Shape, have had considerable influence in this participatory design. John Wright’s (2017) suggestions for using text as mask are influential here.

5 Robert Landy and David Montgomery’s ideas about how theatre can be leveraged for social action and reflection are an influence here (Landy & Montgomery, 2012).

7. The performers present the three stories as an interwoven script with characters plaiting the stories together – linking, overlapping and weaving as time progresses.
8. After the performance there is a short reflective discussion, involving the story tellers and the audience.⁶
9. At the end, audience members are invited to share stories or thoughts of their own in silence. Various forms of capturing these thoughts have been experimented with including post-it notes, flip chart paper or a combination of the two.⁷

We present here two of the scripts. The latest one (Script 3 below) contains two stories: the first is “Racist”, the story of a white woman who discovers the misguided “othering” motivations behind her acts of activism while the second is “Trash”, the story of a black man who gets caught up at a women’s march and is accused of being “trash”. The script of the second iteration (Script 2 below) has the same story as “Trash” but also includes two other stories: “Boer”, the story of a white woman who makes a racial remark unwittingly and experiences an onslaught of guilt and shame; and “Brat”, the story of a girl “born free” (born after apartheid) who learns to navigate a relationship with her father, who grew up during the apartheid struggle.

Script 2: “Trash, Boer and Brat” (Script for second rendition performed at Die Woordfees – an arts festival held in Stellenbosch, near Cape Town, March 2019. This script can be accessed in its entirety at: <https://press.nordicopenaccess.no/index.php/noasp/catalog/book/135>).

Script 3: “Racist Trash” (Script for third version, performed at the Arts Research Africa Conference at Wits University, Johannesburg, January 2020. This script can be accessed in its entirety at: <https://press.nordicopenaccess.no/index.php/noasp/catalog/book/135>).

6 Reflection is an essential moment in applied drama and theatre facilitation (Janse van Vuuren, 2016).

7 These activities are influenced in various site-specific and site-responsive ways, along with the reflective practice aspects of applied drama and theatre. These aspects can be traced back to the works of the myriad practitioners referenced across footnotes as well as the anchors Schechner (2013) and Romain (1996).

A performance clip of the final script can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/oWpuzzXeLik>

The form becomes an arts based research enquiry into the struggles, mistakes, burdens, injustices, silences and redemption-seeking between us as global citizens. We ask participants to step into the shoes of the existing narratives, to reflect on resonance and identification, and we further invite story contributions intersecting with and connecting to race-relations, varied injustices, silencing occurrences and contemporary movements like #MenAreTrash and #BlackLivesMatter. The full session design can be accessed at: <https://press.nordicopenaccess.no/index.php/noasp/catalog/book/135>

The conceptual and scholarly framework in which the work should be considered

In relation to the highlighted stories existing in the current form of redemptive theatre, race and gender authority Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016, 2017, 2019) locates the conversation by writing about the complexity of privilege. She argues that it is often these roles, of whiteness as it relates to womanhood, and maleness as it relates specifically to blackness, that are the points of departure for conversations about discrimination. And while it cannot be denied that these types do indeed experience discrimination, it is more the fact of their constant and consistent centring in almost all conversations to do with sexism and racism that complicates our ability to see the privilege complexities of these positionalities, or, as in the frame of this explorative form, the redemptive potential of their stories, experiences and identities. The voice of Crenshaw, in the way that it grapples with the complexity of being a privileged identity, is an inspiration for conversations around intersectionality and provides a basis for scholars, practitioners and grapplers to seek avenues for visibility and representation.

In speaking about transforming silence into language and action, Audre Lorde (2017), a noteworthy voice in feminist scholarship, highlights vulnerability and a perceived danger that comes with speaking what might bruise or be misunderstood, because that act of transforming

silence is an act of self-revelation and it is fraught. “In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live.” She also offers the thought that death is the ultimate final silence, and highlights that – in big and small ways, no matter who we are, or what our backgrounds are – we share wars with tyrannies of silence, we betray ourselves with small silences daily, silences which may help us survive, but do not necessarily help us live. Silences which in essence do not protect us.

The above are but a few voices with whom redemptive theatre connects. In general, there is resonance with the works, words and practices of those who believe that people are able to liberate themselves, and can find healing from places of shame, regret and despair, and of those who believe and explore the ways that democracy and basic human rights are inseparable, discovering through methods of action. An essence of this has been captured by Toni Morrison, who famously (1979) stated that “the function of freedom is to free somebody else”.

There are also those who argue that it takes building new frames and models to challenge existing realities. These include myriad figures such as Buckminster Fuller (n.d.), Ernesto “Che” Guevara (Guevara & Waters, 2002; Löwy, 2007), Nelson Mandela (2010), Raya Dunayevskaya (1973) and bell hooks (1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2014) to name a few. Thus redemptive theatre, in its current make up, interacts, intersects and engages in scholarship with ideas around humanism, Marxist-humanist thought, complexity theory, identity politics, feminism, and culture and community.

As a contribution to an anthology about building democracy through theatre, we position the work as an experiment in expanding the conventions of traditional theatre performance. In the way that forum or playback theatre exist as archetypal structures, it seeks, through development, to arrive at a replicable form for use in processes attempting to engage with the unpopular story – to redeem, to conflict resolve, or for inclusivity.

Redemptive theatre aligns with some of the ideas of Jacques Rancière (1995, 2006a, 2006b) when he speaks of theatre offering a redistribution of what can be seen, heard and experienced. Specifically, it creates a frame

wherein that which exists in silence can be foregrounded. It does so, firstly, because introducing Silence as a character draws attention to the idea of silence having body and presence, and, secondly, because the script creates deliberate moments of silence in it that compel audience and characters alike to listen to their thoughts in response to what has just been said out loud. Thirdly, each time a character chooses to step off stage leaving their story, in the shape of the script, behind, there is a silence that stretches for as long as it takes for someone to pick up the story, step into the character's shoes and resume the telling. In these silences, thoughts arise: "Who should take up the story? Should I do it? Can someone please step in? What will happen next?" Thoughts like these rush into the minds of participants, requiring all to consider who the story and its implications belong to. Finally, once the telling is over, audience members are asked to respond, in writing or conversation, to the stories or the thoughts that has been stirred up for them in response to the experience, and these are captured on posters outside the venue, or in conversation with cast members. This process democratises the stories in a way that is intended to build bridges and provide routes for redemption. Whether it in fact does so is part of the experiment. Results are as yet inconclusive because the work is still unfolding.

The process design and accompanying documentation can be accessed at: <https://press.nordicopenaccess.no/index.php/noasp/catalog/book/135>

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