

CHAPTER 4

Performing Theatre and Democracy

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Abstract: This collection of performances that is linked to this chapter was created as part of the MA exchange project between NTNU and DFL (Drama for Life). Students used performance ethnography as a method for generating performance material in answer to the challenge of building democracy through theatre. South Africa has a rich theatre history that has always engaged with the South African political narrative. Through developing an understanding of the many theatre-making processes that created this unique history, as well as through exploring other contemporary South African performances, students created and tracked their own research methodology so that they were able to hold up a mirror to the world around them. While each performance captured the individual perspective of the performer, they also engaged directly and indirectly with broader South African realities.

The course consisted of four components, each shaped by the individual's journey into their own research methodology. These were: generating material, interpreting the material, rehearsing the material and performing the material. This submission consists of a framing statement written by the lecturer as well as a collection of ten performances that include a short framing statement from each performer. Permission was obtained from all the students to showcase their work apart from one student who has submitted it under a pseudonym. Out of this exploration and through a practical laboratory, students created an embodied experience that addressed the notion of democracy.

The value of the work was to gain a fresh embodied perspective of democracy in South Africa. It spoke to our unique South African theatre-making legacy, but also challenged and disrupted our understanding of what democracy is and how it might be performed.

Keywords: performance ethnography, embodied experience, democracy

Introduction

“Democracy” is a contentious word with many different meanings and associations. The concept of “democracy” is also filled with contradictions. It evokes images of individual freedom within a world of majority rule, of the sacrifices we make in order to preserve our capacity to make choices in the future, and of countries and systems and peoples who all follow its basic precepts but experience entirely different results.

The concept of “democracy” was explored by two groups of students from two different democratic countries: South Africa and Norway. In 2019 and 2020, a student exchange took place between the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and the South African University of the Witwatersrand. As part of this exchange, Drama for Life (housed at the University of the Witwatersrand) received two Norwegian students in 2019 and one in 2020. These students joined the Performance Ethnography course at master’s level. The theme of the work was “stories of democracy”.

Each individual demonstrated a different understanding of “democracy” – of how choices are located in his or her life, or of how agency is affected by predetermined facts of birth, culture, gender and nationality. Through their research, the students provided us with diverse insights into the meaning of “democracy”.

In this contribution, we provide a framework for the course in which we present a collection of pre-recorded student work that showcases creative explorations into stories of democracy. The work is part of the students’ process that goes towards their final master’s submissions. We invite the reader to consider the collection from this perspective and to explore the ways in which the students came to the issues of “democracy” from their own contexts, countries and experiences.

For the purposes of this research, it must be noted that “democracy” was understood in all its iterations. It was not defined merely as a political system, but also as individual agency, cultural freedom and conceptual understandings of “choice”.

Aims and purpose of the course

The Performance Ethnography course encourages students to explore their own unique relationship with “democracy” by drawing on the world around them. It allows for a balance between theory and their own embodied knowledge, as well as provocation from site observation. Norway and South Africa are both democracies, yet how they function is very different. Theatre practices give researchers the opportunity to explore their own lived experiences of democracies. The collaborative exploration between the South African students and the Norwegian students afforded researchers a chance to interrogate universal ideas of democracies as well as on-the-ground individual realities.

The course also encourages students to explore different methods of working with “democracy” stories, investigating various forms that include verbatim performance, documentary performance, performance art and devised theatre. Through rehearsal, students use a performance laboratory to share their work with each other, receive feedback on the work from their peers and then return to rehearsal. Ultimately, students perform their work for a wider audience.

Some students located themselves deep within the research. They found their own very personal democracy story. South African students Tshepang Moticoe, Paul Noko, Bongani Malinga, Simphiwe Mbonambi, Grace Barnes and Hector Kunene all explored their own lived experiences in response to a “performed” democracy today. Whereas South African student Bongani Ngomane and Norwegian students Glenn Thomas Johansen, Nicole Smith (pseudonym) and Mirabelle Bredvik commented on democracy conceptually – questioning their understanding of and relationship with it.

Conceptual and theoretical frame

The Performance Ethnography course pedagogy is embedded in the notion of the performance laboratory: a space of investigation, interrogation, experimentation and exploration. All creative tasks were backed up with theory so that students could reflect on the work they created

through different theoretical lenses. Students were able to draw on theorists that were useful to their own investigations. I attach their reading lists at the end of the document. The readings fell into three groups, categorised according to purpose:

Group 1: those aimed at enhancing observation skills and performance choices;

Group 2: those aimed at providing an understanding of what performance ethnography means;

Group 3: those aimed at furnishing a case study of other performers' work that reflected notions of democracy.

My role

In both years, my role was one of teacher-director. I facilitated a process that heightened the value of social research, explored different theatre-making methods and ultimately encouraged students to create performances about critical life issues, people and society that impact on democracy.

Emakhazeni

In both 2019 and 2020, students engaged with the local municipality of Emakhazeni as a site of observation. Emakhazeni is unique in that it captures many of the issues that South Africa is facing today, but all in a small and accessible space. Students were able to observe life in the town Machadadorp and the township of Emothonjeni. Both are part of the larger Emakhazeni in the province of Mpumalanga. This small South African town served as a microcosm of South Africa. The Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative (FATC), which partners with Drama for Life, is situated in Emakhazeni. This too afforded students a unique opportunity to observe the work that FATC does in the community, as well as to collaborate with the interns working with FATC. Here they were able to share creative workshops. Emakhazeni gave the students a chance for quiet reflection and deep rehearsal work. This type of observation and stillness

was valuable in helping students to distil and practise their work, in a retreat-type space.

In 2019, at the start of their exchange, Norwegians Nicole Smith and Glen Thomas Johansen (whose work is featured here) travelled to Emakhazeni in rural Mpumalanga in order to conduct their creative site work. On return to the Wits campus, students performed the resulting work to peers and lecturers in a university studio.

Their South African counterparts performed at Emakhazeni during the “My Body My Space” festival, which occurred after the Norwegian students had returned to Norway. The “My Body My Space” festival is a street festival. Performances are site-specific, taking place all-over Emthonjeni and Machadadorp. The audience moves from site to site. The feeling is fluid, exciting and improvisational, changing all the time to accommodate responses from the audiences. While the two Norwegian performances were recorded in a studio at Wits University, the South Africans’ performances at “My Body My Space” were not recorded.

In 2020, students from both countries visited Emakhazeni at the start of the course. The final performances occurred in different virtual settings due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The “My body My Space” festival was delayed. Thus, all works are recorded, and viewings took place online. All student work from 2020 is featured here.

Context of creation

In both 2019 and 2020, unique circumstances affected the students’ work. It is important to note what these were and how they were felt.

In 2019, the academic year began with the Fees Must Fall student protests. Students were protesting against the fee structure at South African universities. Lectures were disrupted and a choppy, volatile feeling was experienced on campus. Students were encouraged to enter into the fee debate. This dialogue provoked and challenged their understanding of what South African democracy was.

In March 2020, the Covid outbreak influenced the practicalities of the course. Lectures took place online and creative explorations had to occur

in challenging conditions for the students. Some had little to no connectivity while others had no electricity. It was a difficult time – which can be felt in the tone and platform choices of the work.

However, despite the differing circumstances over the years, the work remains unique to the creator. The work cannot be easily boxed into annual categories of 2019 or 2020 as the responses from the students were fiercely individual, drawing on their own lived experiences.

Practical component

Description of content: Performances

2019

Five performances were created as a result of this process. They were performed in different sites around Wits and at the “My Body My Space” festival. It is interesting to see how individual responses to stories of democracy differed according to circumstance and performer. Due to the nature of the festival these were not recorded. Here are brief outlines of what they consisted of:

Tshepang Moticoe created a piece around the role indigenous games played in forming identity. She explored how indigenous games allowed her to access memories of playing as a child. She performed on the side of a rural road and used the spectators to play games with her. The games spoke to her identity and gave her an agency in her formative years. Through her work, Tshepang linked ritual to agency. She explored how using a set system of rules could facilitate a greater understanding of identity, and ultimately enhance personal freedom. All democracies involve a form of ritual at their core – rules aimed at providing a framework through which choice can be maximised, repetition and marking of change. Thus Tshepang’s research wove together the concepts of democracy, choice and cultural ritual – themes often separated in theoretical understanding.

Paul Noko took the audience on a physical storytelling journey. We followed him from a small house, to a crèche and then to a school. The

audience paused with him at each relevant site. He told the story of his relationship with two friends from crèche and how their friendship developed as they grew. Starting from childhood, when they watched gangster movies together, moving towards adulthood, when they eventually became actual gangsters themselves. Eventually, a tragic event forced Paul to confront the reality of his life and choose a different path. Paul investigated the role early education plays in forming identity. He used traditional storytelling devices, intertwined with audience participation and site-specific provocation in taking us on this journey. The theme of democracy was present in his work in innovative ways. By using site-specific locations, he rooted his understanding of democracy in his life, and explored the ways in which location and circumstance direct our freedom and pressure us to conform to pre-established patterns of behaviour. The result is a deeply personal investigation into democracy.

Bongani Nicholas Ngomane explored priesthood in South Africa. He investigated false prophets and their effect on their congregation. He examined the theory of priesthood and the performative quality they use to transfix their audience. He questioned African mythology, juxtaposing it with current popular Christianity. He performed on the street in Emthonjeni as well as the Origins Centre at Wits. His work explored democracy by looking at the relationship between religious leaders and the community they serve. An examination of this dynamic can have broader implications for power relationships that exist in democracies. By looking at the interaction between Christianity and African mythology, he also interrogated the relationships between different cultures, and how they can give birth to new forms of belief and practice – even if their source was one built on a lack of choice and coercion.

The remaining two performances were recorded, the links can be accessed below. They took place in the Emakaya theatre at Drama for Life. Here are the brief outlines of these performances.

Glenn Thomas Johansen questioned the democratic process of voting. He held a mock election where there were no actual choices. The audience were asked to choose from three small films that he had made.

They knew nothing about the content of the film and they did not know what they were voting for. The audience viewed two of the films, both exploring Johannesburg from different positions. They never got to see the third film and had no idea what they were missing out on – commentary on the fact that democracy requires knowledge as a precursor for genuine choice. Glen assumed a joker-clown character who held the election. (Link to “Democracy In Practice” by Glenn Thomas Johansen: <https://youtu.be/UHFQHa-rYO8>)

Nicole Smith explored self-silencing in a democracy. Every time she tried to speak, she found herself mute. She had pages and pages of research that she had gathered, but she was unable to communicate it. She handed pieces of her research to the audience, fragments of observations of her time in South Africa. It was an exploration into whose voice is heard in a democracy and the courage needed to speak out. (Link to “7000 Words and Nothing to Say” by Nicole Smith (pseudonym): <https://youtu.be/3IF51DbiWoY>)

2020

In 2020, a further five performances were created.

Hector Kunene explored the impact of absent fathers on adolescents. His work was autoethnographic. Hector used video and re-created a scene from his childhood, examining democracy through the choices that others have made despite us – and how that shapes our own agency.

“[T]his is an autoethnographic exploration of absent fathers, more especially in the black community, through the use of applied theatre techniques. I use practice as research as an applied theatre practitioner and also as a reflexive practice practitioner. Here and there will be elements of facilitation in order to probe engagements and pave a way for interactive dialogue. The performance involves boys who discover their friend sleeping in the middle of the railway. They ask him to get up and they force him up as he complains. In his mind he is thinking of the train that might have taken his father to wherever he left to. He is grumpy and angry that they found him. The stones on his body are a symbol of him being below the surface and his body position underneath. This performance is an

exploration of the body feeling the pain, the body lying on top of the railway stones and other stones on top of the body. The heaviness of death and the death wish in his mind. The relief of being discovered on the verge of death and the exploration of feeling and tampering with death itself and dying dangerously.” (Link to “Absent Fathers Research Exploratory” by Hector Kunene: <https://youtu.be/rZogchNQ86w>)

Simphiwe Mbonambi examined intergenerational relationships in the family structure and how these shifted and changed over time. She conducted an interview with her mother, examining the meaning of democracy through generations, and how the past underscores our relationship with choice. Her creative submission was captured on video and was autoethnographic.

“Exploring family and identity: What does family mean to you? My performance is a self-narrative shared between my mother and myself. I have chosen to focus on storytelling as my preferred medium for unfolding truth. Truth is a deeply personal and subjective experience to me, and I’m interested in where this type of personal reality comes from – my heritage, my identity – the origins of myself identification.” (Link to “Rise up” by Simphiwe Mbonambi: <https://youtu.be/sWQhyeiIGVs>)

Grace Barnes used body knowledge to question performativity in gender. She emphasises the place that identity and gender structures have in influencing the choices we can make for ourselves – how this moulds the democratic landscape. Her work was autoethnographic. She used video and captured her bodily responses to performed femininity.

“‘Alt-Her’ begins to look at the embodied experience that women encounter in everyday life to live up to certain gendered expectations. As an auto-ethnographic exploration, it considers the performativity of gender and draws attention to the repeated acts that inform appropriation of women’s bodies and how they should look, act, dress and exist in the world. The performance calls for a return to the body and senses and unpacks my experience in living in a gendered body that is not defined by myself, but rather by the ‘putting on’ of shoes, this used as a metaphor to the idea of ‘putting on a character’ in order to present myself as acceptable to the world. This comes in the form of knowing by doing, that a consciousness of repeated acts allows the body to be aware of itself through

the senses, memory and thought.” – Grace Barnes (Link to “Alt-Her” by Grace Barnes: https://youtu.be/LuGDZjJ_VNw)

Bongani Malinga disrupted notions of masculinity in rural South Africa. He presented a photo journal and unpacked the influence that masculine bodies have on the choices available to men in a democratic context. His work was auto-ethnographic, both personally and in his social context.

“The photo journal presented traces of the process I am currently undertaking and is made profound by the fact that I am at home. A place where I grew up and had ideas of who I am in relation to others formulated. Although the larger picture of my research is around testing out and teasing out that which is detrimental to the well-being of individuals one can classify as subaltern, I find that my current location affords me the opportunity to begin from the base. This is so that the frame is better prepared to stably undertake radical intervention through performance as a tool. It is necessary work for, if it were not done, I would be forgoing my own sense of agency. The assemblage of images seems to have negated home (the family house) but this choice communicates a contributory factor to this journal.” – Bongani Malinga (Bongani Malinga’s photo journal can be accessed in its entirety at: <https://press.nordicopenaccess.no/index.php/noasp/catalog/book/135>)

Bongani Ngomane¹ created a public ethnographic discourse into democracy and poverty. He used video to capture the role poverty plays in a South Africa democracy.

“‘Mr President’ is the public ethnographic museum of illustration in the mind of the poor that serves to protest. It is a composition that exhibits images to illustrate the conditions that suppress the mindset of *abantu base kas’lam*. Through the pictures, a collage is used to create an abstract image of the mindset that bases the reality of *abantu base kas’lam*. The aim is to puzzle together the reality of the people from Ivory Park – to

¹ Bongani Ngomane was in both groups. In 2019, he joined as visiting creative researcher, not as registered student. In 2020, he was participating as registered student.

create a museum to explore public ethnography as a form of protest in an arts-based methodology to disclose the invisible faith in democracy towards *abantu base kas'lam*.” – Bongani Ngomane (Link to “Mr. President” by Bongani Nicholas Ngomane: <https://youtu.be/84quRCzd3XM>)

Mirabelle Breidvick explored the relationship between language and democracy.

“My intention was simply to highlight how democracy is a ‘work in progress’ and how the flaws of one type of democracy might not be flaws somewhere else.” (Altschuler, 2006) “My wish is for the observers of this piece to start thinking for themselves and explore what democracy means for them and their community and country. We all have negatives and positives when living in a democracy; some want to change their existing democracy, some feel like they can’t, and others do not wish to change it” – Mirabelle Breidvick (Link to “Somewhere Else” by Mirabelle Breidvick: https://youtu.be/aG_qnLtgq6c)

Readings

Performance and observation

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